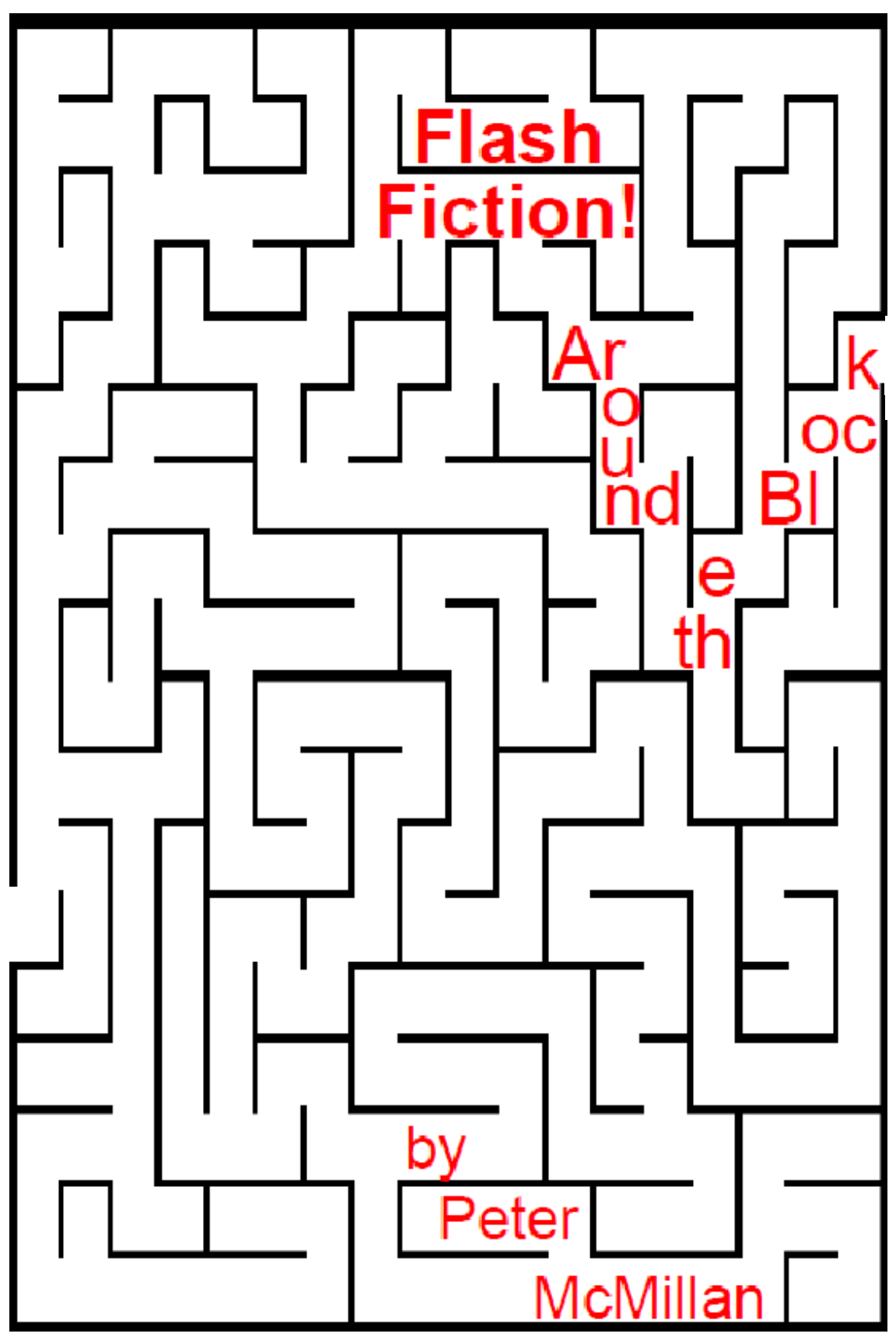
Flash
Fiction!
Around the Block
by
Peter
McMillan

Flash! Fiction (2012) by Peter McMillan

Flash! Fiction 2 (2013) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Flash! Fiction 3 (2014) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Flash! Fiction 4 (2015) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

An Anthology of Hardly 20/20 Flash! Fiction (2020) by Peter McMillan with Adam Mac

Missing Stories: An Anthology of Hardly 20/20 Flash! Fiction (2020) by Peter McMillan & Adam Mac, Maku Miran (ed.)

Collected Essays on Political Economy and Wartime Civil Liberties, 2002-2008 (2020) by Peter McMillan

Willowing Skywardly: Stories and Essays (2022) by Peter McMillan

2022

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Peter McMillan, September 2022

Photographs: Wikimedia Commons

For their prompt suggestions —
The Story Shack, StoryADay and Reedsy

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Introduction

You know what it's like when you know that you're ready to do something, but you just can't seem to get started. This can be for any number of reasons. Maybe the right project idea hasn't come along yet. Maybe you think more planning is needed. Maybe the scope, workload and timelines are just too intimidating.

For writers, this is writer's block and it is very frustrating and debilitating even, especially as it can last for some time. The same thing, in my opinion, exists for readers who are having difficulty getting started on a new reading project, maybe a new genre, a new author, a new language.

What's contained in this relatively short e-book is a collection of 34 flash fiction pieces written from mid-July to Labour Day drawing from random writing prompts provided by thestory-shack.com, storyaday.org and reedsy.com. There are many other sites providing the same sort of service, but these three were more than adequate to help me pick up enough wind to get out of the late summer writing doldrums.

Peter McMillan
Toronto
September 2022

Three dogs race about and wrestle with one another near the playground on a sunny July Saturday afternoon. Two Dalmatians and a Labradoodle. A young couple in their twenties and an older woman, Australian by accent, stand by watching and enjoying the moment so far removed from the last time they met in the park in the blowing snow of a late January afternoon. The park, dimensioned like a soccer pitch with sidelines thrown in, abuts an elementary school to the north and a one-block residential street to the south. The upper storeys of the rear façades of a dozen-and-a-half homes on either side rise above the heavily-treed backyards, which are protected from wanderers by wooden or chain-link fences.

Cutting through the middle of the park in the fresh-cut grass is a man, fortyish, in a smart blue blazer. He's unremarkable if you've never seen him before. He takes the same path summer and winter, it doesn't matter—blue blazer, white dress shirt open at the collar and beige or grey slacks, shopping bag in hand, coming or going. No one else seems to know or care which is which.

Last February when we had that 50-centimetre snowfall, he—the man in the blue blazer—was seen trekking through the park with no winter coat, no hat, no gloves, and no boots. The only thing different was the cherry red scarf. There was the umbrella, too—bright yellow and blue and of good size and durable against both the strong winter winds that sweep through from the northwest bringing frigid Arctic air and the sudden summertime gusts that bring saturated cloud banks and heavy rains across Lake Ontario. Once upon a time a powerful summer storm carried away the Town's lighthouse and pier ... so they say.

Some of the newcomers—and there have been many as we transition from what the Town calls a legacy neighbourhood to a community of million dollar-plus homes in one of the longest-running housing bubbles anyone can remember—thought he was loony. That thought crossed my mind the first few times I saw him, but after awhile, I began to imagine something a little different. Maybe he has an elder parent in the nursing home behind the renovated shopping mall-cum-condo complex a couple of blocks away. It could be he brings home-cooked meals. Or, perhaps he works in one of the ground-floor condo offices and brings his own home-cooked meals to work. No reason—other than boredom—to think he might be some sort of Hitchcockian figure with dark and hidden pursuits.

The Dalmatians and Labradoodle finish their romp and are taken home pulling at their leashes past the family of four that has just arrived. Two chubby, kindergarten-aged children, a boy and a girl, run to the swing set and the slide, respectively. They're new—very recently so. Just built the new two-storey at Sunset and Yale—one of the nicer infills that doesn't follow a boilerplate design. There's no dog with them, though you can guess that one isn't too far in the future by the way the kids react when they see the dogs.

It is momentary and mostly unnoticed—the man in the blue blazer passing—for it's the playground that's the centre of attention. On any given sunny weekend afternoon in summer or spring and even in early to mid-autumn, this scene plays out countless times. The park—actually, it's called a Garden, though the flowers, the hardy and handsome hydrangea being a favourite, are sparingly planted and shades of green predominate, except when the fall colours of maples, birches, and volunteer sumac flare up—is a hub in this residential pocket. A younger community and more professionals working from home

since the pandemic has increased the park activity beyond anything that had been expected back in the '60s when this subdi-subdivision replaced the longstanding apple orchard or a pig farm—oral history is unclear about which, though the former is preferred.

Having lived here for 25 years, I'm considered an old-timer. There are only a handful of people who've lived here longer—only two, maybe three, whose names I remember. It was that kind of neighbourhood and it didn't feel that strange to those of us who'd emigrated from the city ages ago. Privacy was a thing, as they say now.

The man in the blue blazer hadn't always been 'the man in the blue blazer.' At least, I don't recall him from the early days. But ever since I started paying attention, he has been, for me anyway, a fixture, a constant pre-dating the long wave of gentrification. Before the pandemic, I'd catch sight of him when my wife and I would go for walks after dinner. During the pandemic, I worked from home, and because my office overlooks the park, I'd see him often. My wife used to tease me calling me Emma when she saw me staring out the window. Now that I'm semi-retired and alone—fancying myself as writer, though it's mostly scribbled sketches about what's on the other side of the glass—I sit at the window more than I ever did.

Who is he? What does he do for living? Does he have a family? What kind of car does he drive? Does he live in a MacMansion or what newcomers call a legacy bungalow? But the usual questions don't interest me. I want his story. What lies beneath the surface of his constancy? Is it some profound personal commitment? Is it a routine that has consumed him? Is he nuts? They tell me that I can't use terms like that anymore. Not in public, anyway. I disagree. As an eccentric myself who relies

on one of the many varieties of soma on the market, I think I have certain language rights, and I indulge that sense of entitlement.

Curiosity has tempted me to shadow the man in the blue blazer in order to remove the veil of mystery ... and intrigue, if there's any of that. But when I consider that he might be nothing more than a 21st century Bartleby, I realize that a part of my life will have ended in disappointment. My imagination will have lost its quarry, and there'll be precious little left to keep it going. The same would be true if the man in the blue blazer is taking specially prepared food to an old parent in the rest home. In fact, it would be true if it turned out that he is a lunatic who'd been long ago released from a psycho hospital to live among us regardless of whether any residual tendencies of a perverse or violent nature persist.

And so, when I think beyond the moment of discovery, i.e., the end of the story, it's clear that the man in the blue blazer must remain *un peu de mystère*. It keeps part of my chemically-balanced brain occupied and entertained. As one who thinks along these non-Euclidean lines, it has occurred to me that another may need me for their own little mystery as much as I need the man in the blue blazer. What if I were to disappear from my window? Would someone else miss my presence?

What happened to the old guy in the window—you know, the one who always seemed to be looking out to see what was doing? Kinda creeped out some of the neighbours, but over time you got used to it. Whenever I waved, he nodded. Some days that was the only human contact I had on my short-cut through the park to the metro.

Maybe I flatter myself to think so ... but do any of us live and leave not a trace behind? Would I be wrong to think that was tragic, or would I just be perpetuating our arrogance and vanity?

———

From offstage the response comes, *sotto voce*, "Yes, you mite."

Published in *Down in the Dirt*, November 2022, vol. 201.

By the middle of the 23rd century, global society's interests in individual privacy had given way to the efficiency arguments of universal health care. The pandemics of the late 21st and 22nd centuries had killed hundreds of millions, and the political landscape of health care had changed ... dramatically. The UN's Charter of Human Rights was no longer relevant. Humanity—the species—had to come first, and under the authority of the Earth Supreme Council, health care and all the administrative functions that were entailed were to be universally mandated. This was not so much for the purpose of protecting individuals but for protecting society from individuals who pose a health risk.

In its most recent extension of global health care governance, the Supreme Council had authorized all listed insurance companies that provided health care coverage to require that their clients and new applicants receive industry-approved subcutaneous RFID tags for the purpose of identification and online medical records management. The roll-out was expected to take 2 years—5 in the countries of the Global South. Non-compliance at the individual level could lead to imprisonment and/or fines, while non-cooperation by communities could result in long-term periods of quarantine. To ensure as peaceful a transition as possible, the Earth Health Organization's security budget was quadrupled, and military and police units were seconded to the Earth Security Organization.

One incident which appeared in the Global Press—though how is beyond anyone's guess—illustrated why the Earth Supreme Council had emphasized the security dimensions of the project. A farmer in India—a radical land reformer and 'privacy fanatic' known to law enforcement—had refused the RFID injection and

had started a riot in New Delhi in which 53 people were killed and 492 were detained. The instigator was disappeared. The Earth Council High Commissioner for South Asia had acted swiftly in dispatching security, and the rebellion was quashed in a matter of hours. In her press briefing after peace was restored to the streets, the High Commissioner took advantage of the situation by telling the hundreds of millions watching and listening that the riot had been precipitated by an irrational fear of science. Looking to her right, she spoke these words to her chief physician, "You have my permission," and forthwith the injection was completed. Having anticipated the skeptics, she then called for the wall projection to show the RFID tag as it looked under a powerful digital microscope. The identification number was redacted due to privacy concerns, but her point was made. Then, referring to the next image—a high-resolution magnification of a grain of sand from the beaches of Goa side by side with an RFID tag, hers—she observed, with her audience, that they were approximately the same size.

No other disruptions were reported by the Global Press—and this one report was subsequently purged from the Global Archives—and so the ambitious RFID'ing of the world's population of just over 6 billion proceeded on schedule, disproving the critics, the unassimilated capitalist class from the Global North who argue that centralization is inherently inefficient if not incentivized by the profit motive and the state aid of sovereign nations.

Konstantin's farm was bought at auction by Natural Ethics, a Chicago-based hedge fund whose largest acquisition to date was Archer Daniels Midland. For the last several years, Natural Ethics had been buying up huge tracts of farmland in southern Manitoba and it now owned roughly 15 percent of the arable land in the province. The new Conservative Government in Ottawa—kept out of power for 14 years by the Trudeau Liberals—was shamelessly soliciting bids for Canadian natural resources, mostly from south of the border, as it positioned Canada to integrate more seamlessly with the U.S.

Farmers like Konstantin, whose family had farmed the land in the Assiniboine Basin since emigrating from the USSR in the late 1920s, had been gradually driven off the land by crop failures attributable to the increasing frequency of floods and droughts, and Natural Ethics had been there to buy up their farms and convert them into mega-farms. Some of the farmers, like Konstantin, a widower whose two sons were in computers—one in Silicon Valley and the other in Toronto—had no place else to go, and so they stayed on the land ... as farm employees. Konstantin had become a hired hand.

Over the past 25 years, Konstantin's family farm had shrunk from its original 5,500-plus acres to 250 acres, and the last two summer droughts brought the downsizing to an end with the liquidation of the very plot of land originally purchased by his grandfather to grow wheat just like in the Old Country. This year, Konstantin works the land but only as per the directions from Chicago as filtered down through its Brandon office. None of the families from the neighbouring farms remain, not that Konstantin was particularly amiable with any of them. But now, he has even less in common with the other Natural Ethics' staff,

and seems to have cultivated a reputation for being arrogant and generally disagreeable with 'outsiders,' to a degree that keeps his job at risk.

In his ever increasing hours of leisure—spent entirely in his own and only his own company—Konstantin has taken to recording his family's history in Canada with plans to publish it as a personal sequel to *The Sons of the Soil*—the book that his parents and siblings had read over and over in their farmhouse living room on those long, sub-zero Winter nights, when the deep snow absorbed the sounds of nature and, on clear nights, reflected the light from the star-filled heavens. This was the big sky country of the sweeping Canadian Prairies.

You're an idiot, Konstantin. No one wants to read your melancholia. Go live with Don. He's invited you, and besides he says there's a Ukrainian enclave in Toronto where at least you'll have the company of other old fools like yourself.

That may be true, but, you know, there are no stars in the sky in Toronto. They're all at ground level, and that the world famous view of that sprawling megalopolis from that railroad monument can in no way compete with the Prairie view of the galaxies. This is where I'd rather be.

"Eureka!" Dr. Bloomwhistle unlocked the door to the lab and ran down the steps of Parker Hall, jumped in her car and sped off to the warehouse down by the docks. Her assistant met her at the back of the building with an excited hug and very nearly screamed in celebration himself but was quickly stifled by the hand of the professor who covered his mouth and shushed him as she looked furtively about the dimly lit alleyway. "You've done, it Professor," the assistant whispered rather more loudly than was called for as he half carried his mentor into the warehouse and their secret room in the basement.

Once inside with the doors closed, the two paraded soundlessly around the table, gesticulating gleefully and grinning from ear to ear as they took in the small wire cage that contained an ordinary but healthy looking white mouse connected by numerous wires to a monitor that tracked its vital signs.

"He's been stable since you initiated the teleportation, and that was exactly 14 minutes ago. I think this one is a success, too, Professor."

"It may be too early yet to proclaim success. From here on, every attempt must be successful even as we vary some of the more complex initial conditions, but let's say that we have a working prototype. I'll phone our friends who can arrange for a quiet transfer of our equipment to the team in Geneva."

Two hours later an unmarked black van pulled into the underground parking garage of Parker Hall. The CCTV cameras on the west side had been reprogrammed two minutes earlier. It had to be a dark op because of the sensitivity of the technology housed in the Physics labs, though this was by no means to the

standards of security found in some of the government's clandestine labs. The research conducted on the nation's public university campuses was typically early-stage and carefully managed in silos separate from end-use research centers. Ambiguity and deniability were woven into the most promising projects in the event that the they needed to be migrated to the high-security silos where all traces to the university research community had to be 'sanitized.'

Two agents, unobserved and unidentifiable, using the multifactor authentication credentials they had been given, entered Dr. Bloomwhistle's lab, disassembled the teleportation equipment and had it all safely packed away in the van in under two-and-a-half minutes ... on schedule. Once the van had emerged street level and was two blocks away, the CCTV cameras that had been temporarily programmed into an endless loop returned to their live feeds.

The van pulled into a strip mall in suburban Baltimore where the cargo was switched to a gun metal blue SUV, which traveled down I-95 to Miami and arrived at the docks where the cruise ships were quayside. It was mid-morning, and the man and woman in the SUV unloaded the box—approximately one cubic meter in size—and arranged for it to be placed in climate-controlled storage and checked it through to Barcelona, where it would be then shipped by rail to its final destination in Geneva.

Meanwhile, in the wee hours of the morning, there had been a five-alarm fire in a warehouse dockside in Baltimore. There were no fatalities but an older woman was pulled from the burning building and reportedly suffered 3rd-degree burns over her entire body. She mouthed the words, "Irving, I can't see you," but lost consciousness until she reached a Level 1 trauma cen-

ter. On hearing these words, a firefighter called to two of his buddies to join him for re-entry to see whether 'Irving' was still in there.

No one was found and no other bodies were recovered. The Office of the Fire Marshal conducted an investigation and concluded that the cause of the fire was faulty wiring. There was no evidence of foul play, and nothing was found in the fire debris that wouldn't be expected in an old, abandoned warehouse. Nevertheless, a professor's presence at that location at that time of night did prompt a police investigation, which was terminated before a report could be issued. 'Irving' remained a mystery, as the university had no record of an 'Irving' working in the Physics labs in Parker Hall. Dr. Bloomwhistle went into cardiac arrest at the hospital. She never regained consciousness and never spoke another word.

Days later, police in Marseilles confiscated a large box of scientific equipment collected in a raid on one of the mafia organizations with an extensive network in the Mediterranean. Shortly afterwards, the box disappeared while in police custody and the loss was written off without further questions as authorized by the Superintendent himself.

I was there. I was in the Capitol Building. I was in the House of Representatives. This was authentic. This was what freedom from tyranny is all about. We the people. We get pushed aside and shoved down and drowned out but we won't be passive forever. Push us too far and we'll push back. That's what we're doing today. Pushing back against the Washington Establishment's government over the people as opposed to government for the people and by the people. What did the man say, 'Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' Well, that's the situation here in D.C. and has been for a long, long time, and finally, we have an opportunity to change that. We have a leader, and he's not perfect but he's a means to an end. He offers our best chance going of purging the corrupt and venal political system that has entrenched itself to serve itself and not the Republic. He's gotten us the Court we need to re-balance the scales of justice. He's put the fear of voters into the hearts of politicians, On the other side, they say we've created a monster. Well, that's right. We have created a monster, because we need a monster to sweep away all the decadence and weakness of contemporary America. But as easily as we created this monster, we can bring him down, and he knows that. We take our cue from the English tradition where the leader ultimately must serve the people or else. Look what they did to King Charles [Charles I]. See how the British Monarchy has been taken over and converted to a museum piece for the public's entertainment. That's the power of the people acting over generations to recover their rights of self-government. We're not the cavemen you may have seen on TV parading around in the halls of Congress. We're not the beer-guzzling, gun-toting imbeciles who make the front-page news. Their function is limited. They represent a force for agitation against passivity, compromise and despair, but they are nonetheless a force under our

control. Like our leader, they can help us bring on the change, but they represent, as does our leader, the means to a greater goal—liberty against the tyranny of faceless and nameless bureaucracy and the country club system of privilege at the expense of democracy. Long ago we heard from a different group the line that 'The Revolution will not be televised.' Today we appropriate that slogan and invite the oppressed from all parts of our society to join us. We are not white privilege. We are not modern-day Crusaders defending Western civilization against outsiders. We are the people whose masters are being repudiated, the people who are imbued with the desire for freedom, for political power, and yes, for economic power. We're not Communists, but we're not the servants of oligarchy past, present or future. That has to change, and we're here today to move one step closer to our goal, which is—let's make it crystal clear—about the redistribution of political and economic power and the eradication of undemocratic privilege. There, it's out there. Our enemies will fight to protect their advantage—we don't expect anything less—but let them know that we want—no, we demand—more and we demand it now. Write us off as disaffected white trash, but do it at your own peril. That is not who we are, and we will not be dismissed as such. And one final point, we are not here for photo ops and selfies and all such silly and childlike games. We are here for the long-term for we know what we seek is not just around the corner.

#

We expected danger, but not on the scale and with the ferocity and hatred that came at us. Some of us, myself included, knew—personally knew—some of the people in the mob, and man, we couldn't believe it. People who we thought were like us, law-abiding and patriot Americans, proud of the flag we respect and revere for its symbolic value and for the difference it

represents between America and many other places in the world run by dictators and other enemies of the freedoms and democracy we have. Yeah, yeah, I know it's not perfect. I'm a black man. You don't need to tell me a thing. I know all about it ... the hypocrisy, the discrimination, the lack of respect. I've lived it for nearly 50 years. But that isn't the only side of America and it isn't even the dominant side. Things have changed a lot in my lifetime ... and, frankly I can't think of any other country where I'd rather live. I fought for this country and I still serve and protect, but I always told my kids that I did it for the America that was emerging from the darkness of an evil past. America is not the same as it was 50 years ago or 100 years ago or 150 years ago. As a people, we don't look the same and there's a lot that's different about us, but there's one thing that unites us and that's the community that we call America. Yes, I will fight for it. I will fight for it, because of all the good people I know who deserve better and who want to make things better. I don't recognize some of what I see in the crowd. What I see is a threat to my community, to America, and it is my job, but more than that, my duty, to protect my community come what may, and as the day goes on I begin to wonder just what it is that might be coming. I've been spit at. I've been cursed. I've been hit and shoved and even assaulted. And this by people who look a whole lot like the people I see in the stores, restaurants, concerts, sporting events, and even churches in the D.C. area. This is culture shock and I haven't even left the U.S.A. I can't begin to comprehend where these folks are coming from ... in such large numbers with such tenacity and venom. I can only imagine worse by picturing the prison doors opened and all the felons, murderers, rapists, child molesters turned loose against the public. It is frightening to watch your community become unhinged right before your very eyes. And there's no cavalry for this one. At least it has shown up yet. I wonder if my buddies and I will come out of this alive, because I truly fear for

the worst. And America—is America seeing what's happening and how does it look on TV compared to how it feels out here on the street, in the cold, vastly outnumbered by people who mean harm? Do they really believe that they are patriots? Have they been so brainwashed that they can't see, can't feel what they're doing to the fellow citizens. I grew up during the Cold War, so for me I remember the threat of the Soviet Union. We're not the Soviet military; we're not the Soviet secret police. We're your neighbor's for God's sake. I've seen you in Kroger's. I see you in the shopping malls, I've seen you at the airport, in government offices and in restaurants and move theaters. I had no idea then what ill feelings you had towards me. How well you hid it. Oh God! I'm down on the ground. I have to get up or they'll kill me. "Officer down. Officer needs assistance. Over."

#

"Hey Jon, Stephanie, Max! Come look at this. They really did it. These Trump supporters have broken into the U.S. Capitol and there's nothing that the police can do to stop them. They must be outnumbered a 100 to 1. Good God! This looks like live footage from someplace ... like a white version of a 3rd World riot."

"Is this live? Is it happening right now in D.C.?

"Yep. It's live and it's just down the street."

"Thank God those people don't know about our offices on the lettered streets. Can you imagine?"

"Guess dinner's off for tonight?"

"Don't be stupid, Sam! This is a f___ing riot ... in America and in D.C. I was just in the Capitol Building last month and look at these people. They're animals."

"Why isn't the National Guard there? Didn't the Capitol Police anticipate any of this? This is crazy. We can't even defend our Capitol. Last time something like this happened was 1812, wasn't it? Wasn't that when the Brits came down from Canada and burned down the White House?"

"Yeah, but don't forget we burned down what is now Toronto first, and war is war."

"But we're not at war! Not with each other. We've learned to live in an America that can be attacked by foreigners—9/11? But we're totally unprepared for this kind of civil—"

"Don't get overexcited. This is a made-for-TV event after all. The President's been stringing his people along for months. It'll be like everything Trump has been behind—it'll fizzle out on its own."

"But how long will it take?"

"Well, if Trump is confronted, say by the National Guard or the U.S. military, God forbid, you know he'll back down. He'll figure out a way to make it look like he won this PR battle. He's done it for 4 years and his entire adult life."

"I don't know about y'all but I'm going to catch the Metro now and watch from home. I don't want to be anywhere in the neighbourhood when this gets uglier."

"Not a bad idea. Think I'll call the school and pick up the kids early."

"My wife is in the Capitol Building today. I'm not leaving."

"What can you do?"

"I don't know. I don't feel like pretending to be Bruce Willis."

"Good. That means you'll probably live."

"Jon. That was truly inappropriate. Kathryn is down there in the middle of all this. This is no time to be flippant."

"Sorry, Max, Wasn't thinking. It was a stupid comment."

"Just got through to the school. The kids will be ready for me to pick them up as soon as I can get over there. Take care everyone! Be safe, and God bless America—for real."

He'd gotten hooked playing the lottery soon after starting his job as a supervisor at the Xerox colour toner plant. He hadn't forgotten where he started from, as a packer on the blue line, and this was one of the ways he kept in touch with the guys on the line he'd worked beside for years. Besides, he wasn't one to take on airs like so many supers who'd pass through the plant.

That was 15 or maybe 16 years ago. Whichever, it was a long streak of losing week after week. Not even a win to buy tickets for the next week. Just not destined for that kind of good luck. In fact, it seemed that everything had to be earned with patience and effort. He wasn't savvy enough to spot an opportunity. Hell, he missed the punch line on most of the jokes told in the lunchroom. And he was anything but smart enough or good-looking enough to attract attention. Just an average shmoe in pretty much every way imaginable.

Misfortune wasn't so elusive. In his twenties he'd suffered a nervous breakdown and was diagnosed with an OCD anxiety disorder. His manifestation was writing strings of numbers on Post-it notes, no apparent connection to anything. His shrink said she thought his condition was related to his having a slightly above average IQ—he'd smiled when he heard that—and being stuck in a mindless, repetitive job. She didn't have to suggest that he get another job, because it was patently obvious that the man couldn't sell himself to save his life. Drugs, she'd said. He'd need medication. And he went through a pharmacopeia of drugs, which became progressively less effective, especially as his supervisory anxieties began to overwhelm him. He'd accommodated this ever-changing regime by expanding his note-taking to include abbreviations.

He had a couple of episodes—minor enough that an ordinary sick day covered his absence. On the second occasion, his shrink, apparently reaching the bottom of some list, prescribed dopamax. She didn't call it that. That was the slang he'd picked up somewhere. Anyway, it changed his life. Not for the better. Quite literally, it made him stupid. He made stupid mistakes at work. He got easily confused. And he couldn't make sense of his notes anymore. He had to go on a medical leave for a couple of months, and that was not a career-enhancing development. His hospital shrink immediately took him off Topomax and prescribed Cognitive Based Therapy backed up with a mild anti-anxiety med. He worked diligently with the CBT, and that helped but the effects of the dopamax persisted even after he was released from hospital and allowed to return to work.

He bought his first lottery ticket the day he got out of the hospital, taking his recovery as a sign of better luck, and to everyone's surprise and freudenfreude he started winning. Small stakes, but enough to pay for his ticket and more importantly enough to bolster his self-confidence. One Saturday morning, his life turned right side up. He'd won the lottery. The prize—one million smackeroos. $1 million. One million Washingtons; 10,000 Benjamins. He was a millionaire. Overnight. On a lime green Post-it note, he scribbled two dates: '11-7' and 'Jul 13,' then stuffed the note in his back pocket.

He spent the rest of the weekend working through countless thought records as his moods swung wildly from one extreme to another. By Sunday night, he'd convinced himself that this was real and that he could start working out new plan for his life. He didn't tell anyone at work and there was no one else in his life to tell, so it was a tight secret. Although he didn't share his news of good fortune, the guys at work picked up on the

change in his demeanor. He'd become noticeable. One of the secretaries in the front office whom he'd quietly pined after for years even spoke to him a couple of times in passing when he happened to be called up to the office area. She'd even smiled, and he'd never recalled a pretty woman smiling at him in any way that didn't suggest pity.

Time slipped by in a way it never had before. The knowledge of the life-saving lottery win made him feel different; alive; energized; hopeful. He began to enjoy the full range of mundane and uninteresting parts of his life, as if he knew that he was soon to transcend all this and wanted to drink deeply into his existence before it changed. He was in no hurry to turn in his winning ticket. It was valid for one year, and thanks to his meticulous note-taking he was on top of it.

Then occurred another development that fully absorbed him. The secretary—she'd agreed to see him. It was not a hurried or reckless affair. It was premeditated, and apparently it was regarded cautiously by both parties.

Months passed and mid-summer had arrived again. She had gone to Milwaukee to visit her sister for the weekend, so he was alone. He took the opportunity to organize his notes—something he hadn't done in weeks, if memory served. Had a small stack of 2"x2" yellow sticky notes and then a handful of notes in assorted bright colors—blue, orange, lime green, purple, etc. Usually, when he'd finished with a particular note, he would mark a strong diagonal line in red across the note, but he hadn't got to this task in quite some time, so there were likely many notes that were no longer relevant. The brightly-coloured notes were of greater significance, and that made the sorting easier.

He worked his way through the blue, orange, purple, and then came to the lime green Post-it note. There was only one. He remembered that this was an important note, but for the life of him he couldn't place the significance. '11-7' and 'Jul 13.' There was a slight tear in the note between the two sets of numbers, which presumably, he thought, were both dates.

The dopamax haze revisited him from time to time, and for a couple of minutes he was back in it. Then, 'Jul 13' burst into his mental field of vision and he thought immediately of the ring. When he remembered the ring, he remembered that it was Elizabeth's birthday and that he had wanted to surprise her like she'd never been surprised before.

She was returning from Milwaukee next week and would be back tomorrow on the 12th. He looked again at the lime green Post-it note and knew right away that July 13th was not just Elizabeth's birthday but also the day he planned to propose to her. He breathed a sigh of relief at resolving that mystery in time, but there was this other number on the note. Now, '11-7' could be November 7th. Was that the anniversary of his winning ticket? No. He remembered distinctly that he'd discovered his win in the summertime, about this time of year. So, what could be the significance of '11-7.'

After an hour or so of wracking his brains to remember, he put it aside, and to relieve the anxiety he was feeling, he set up a thought record and recorded his thoughts and feelings as he'd done so many times before when he stress and worry overwhelmed him. He finished the thought record filling in the blanks with as much detail as he could, and by the time he'd finished, he was ready to have a drink, listen to some trumpet jazz, and fall asleep on the sofa.

Around 3 a.m., he woke up in a sweat. He knew what '11-7' meant and he was frozen in catatonic space physically, mentally and emotionally.

The thaw came gradually and painfully. '11-7' was July 11th. He'd used the European date format, because Elizabeth was from the U.K.

It was now 3 a.m. on July 12th. The lottery ticket had expired.

The empty highway is beginning to melt. Lying in the shade of an overturned rowboat is a crusty, disheveled figure in a full-length robe that may have once been white. There are soft, rounded mountains to the west and tall, jagged mountains to the east, and in the miles in between lay an oblong-shaped desert, that from a certain angle at a higher altitude might resemble the bowl of a gigantic spoon sparsely spread with scrub brush and cacti.

"Sir, according to my calculations, we have a problem."

"What problem? We're in the middle of a goddamn dessert with no water, no food, no transportation and now no communication, and there's a massive meteor hurtling our way that is expected to hit the ocean and trigger a tsunami that will spill over the western mountain range, and this is supposed to happen sometime in the next 24 hours. So, what problem were you thinking of, Ezekiel, my robotic friend?"

"Yes sir, you are correct in your assessment of our situation. However, I wish to bring to your attention another ... complication."

"Ah, just a complication. That doesn't sound too bad. What is it? I'm not going anywhere and I'm all ears."

"Yes sir, this new complication has arisen since the last transmission I received from the JPL systems before our satellite connection was interrupted. There are two critical pieces of data that were not included in the portion of the feed that I received. First, we do not have a forecast of the ocean temperature after the meteor hits. Second, we do not have a

high-probability forecast of the location of the meteor strike. Without knowing these data, it is virtually impossible to calculate with a 95-percent level of accuracy what the temperature of the water will be after the tsunami crests the mountains and reaches us."

"So, it's 95 percent accuracy we're after, is it? How 'bout just giving me our odds, partner."

"Well, sir. It isn't a reliable projection, but I can estimate with a certainty approaching 55 percent that the water temperature we will encounter will be no less than 100°."

"Fahrenheit?"

"No sir. Celsius."

"So, this little boat that was supposed to carry us to the safety of the foothills of the eastern range is gonna burn up before the oars hit the water. Is that what you're telling me?"

"Yes sir."

"And so, what do you suggest, my good friend and bearer of the news of my—our—imminent destruction?"

"Sir, it is with reluctance that I urge you to 'get right with your deity'—I think that's the correct expression—for it may provide some mental anesthetic in the interim, as it were."

New to the neighbourhood, he'd heard that the grocery store down the street had the freshest produce in town, so that's where he went to pick up the Romaine lettuce and three-color cole slaw. Somehow he'd stumbled on a bachelor menu item combining egg thins, lettuce and cole slaw and a overly-generous yellow mustard and onion dressing, and he'd been eating that nights since the weather had turned hot. In the produce section, as he was browsing through the stack of lettuce, the young woman he'd met the day before recognized him and offered that he take care and wash the lettuce thoroughly. Salmonella, she said. He'd met her by chance. Her sheepdog had slipped its collar and got loose at the park. Just like in a cheap romance novel, he'd rescued the dog and returned it safely to her, for which she said that she would be eternally grateful. That was just too fine a piece of good luck for someone like him to stumble into, so he wrote it off as a passing fancy and not a serendipitous happening.

That was two weeks ago, and my instincts had been right, but other drives were at play and they assumed the position of prominence in my affairs. I saw her a third time at the corner bistro, and we'd shared a coffee, and that's when she invited me to a party she was having for a friend at her place. She was in the condo towers across the street, with a near panoramic view of Lake Michigan. Naturally, by now it had become natural, I accepted and from there everything snowballed. I moved in with her, because my place was a dump and I was renting month-by-month. She behaved as if she were the condo owner, and I had no reason or interest in questioning, so we moved beyond that very quickly.

It was a splendid summer and the fall was even more magnificent, but by December there was a chill in the air. His work became very stressful leading up to Christmas, and she grew increasingly disagreeable with his work-life imbalance. The day she yelled at him in the kitchen for drinking out of the orange juice carton, a switch tripped and their connectivity never quite re-stabilized. They started sleeping apart. Every day it seemed, he'd hear her shouting at the dog or at the phone after she'd hung up, and he retreated, not being confrontational. He was worse, much worse—he was passive aggressive in the extreme. He managed to set her off as if that was his part and he played it well. His unflattering comments about her habits or unfavourable views about her friends were more than just unguarded. They were downright provocative as even he acknowledged when replaying episodes in his mind.

Long story short, one day I choked her to death on the balcony overlooking a glorious sunrise over the lake. She was screaming at the dog again and then me, and the sound of that shrieking banshee voice filled the clear, cold air several floors above and below and even across the street as the traffic was still light that early. I put my hand to her mouth, she pushed away, and then I grabbed her skinny neck—I'd never noticed how beautiful and slender her neck was—and closed my grip. Just enough to silence the screeching harpy, but it was never quite enough, so I squeezed harder and tighter, looking around to see if I was being watched. The dog was watching. It was paralyzed with fear. But no one else caught my eye. And then it was over. My hold relaxed, and she slumped to the frosty balcony floor. The dog moaned, tucked its tail and ran away. The look he gave me when before he turned to run slapped me wide awake to what I'd done. That look never leaves me when the lights are turned out. It was as if she had been looking at me through her dog's eyes.

His life ended that day—not literally. But in every way that seemed to matter, he was dead. Once again he considered that if only he had been consistently unlucky, things might have turned out differently.

"That's the third customer who's complained about the milk, Ernie? Has it all gone bad?"

"Expiry date was two days ago. But that's the freshest they're gonna get—here or anywhere."

"Yeah, well you tell 'em Ernie, 'cause I'm fed up listening to their complainin."

"How many are out there now?"

"Just two—I mean a couple and then a family of four."

"How many complainers?"

"Six—seven counting me."

"What else are they going on about?"

"Aside from the milk, it's mostly what's happening out there."

"What have they told you about what's happening out there. I haven't stepped out since yesterday morning."

"It's quiet—like in an eerie kinda way—and it's too warm, especially for January."

"Any traffic, any news?"

"Nope."

"Are we they only ones with electricity and running water?"

"Seems so. Can't understand why that fellow in here first thing this morning left. Where can you go?"

"Did he say? Did you ask?"

"No, and he wasn't a talker. One of those you leave be."

"Did he pay?"

"Yeah, but what does it matter? Where we gonna spend any money we make here?"

...

"Think this'll last much longer, Ernie?"

"Hell, if I know. Two weeks back I woulda said 'No,' but— Hey, one of your customers is trying to get your attention."

"OK. You just let me know if anything else is spoiled ... like the eggs. Don't want folks getting sick on us. There's no help anywhere. Besides, I don't want to have to clean the restrooms every time somebody goes in."

Ernie lets the door to the kitchen swing closed, and Debbie makes her way to the table nearest the front door.

'Everything OK here?"

"The world around us is going to hell and you're asking if everything's OK?"

"Um. Well, ma'am. There's nothing I can do about out there, but I can try to make things a little better in here."

"Judy. Take it easy. It's not her fault. She's a victim just like us .... I'm sorry ma'am, but my wife is under a lotta stress and she's expecting as you can probably tell."

"Honey. I'm so sorry that you're in this situation. I have two boys of my own, and I remember how I felt responsible for everything when I was carrying them."

"Where are they now?"

"That, I can't say, but I think about 'em all day, every day."

"I'm sorry for taking it out on you. It must be hormones or—"

"Shhh, don't worry about it. This situation's testing us all, and sometimes we handle it better than other times."

"I'm sorry to have been so rude about the milk, too."

"Can't blame you. We haven't been able to get fresh milk in the last week. The eggs were amazing though, weren't they honey?"

"We don't have much in the way of fresh food. Our deliveries stopped two weeks ago, and we're just real lucky we've still got lights and water."

"We are both very happy and grateful to have been able to clean up in your restroom. It's so windy and dirty out there ... and so hard to breathe."

"I must've looked a mess when we came in."

"Well, we're happy to share what we have, as long as we can."

"You're very gracious ma'am ... especially under these circumstances. After wandering the streets in search of someone and some place, this place really is like a world apart. We've meet fewer people than we can count on our hands, and most of them—well, it's about survival isn't it? And like you said, some handle it better than others."

"Excuse me a minute. I think the other table is waving at me. I'll be right back if you need anything else."

"Thank you ma'am."

"How are we doing over here? Aside from the milk, is everything satisfactory?"

"I'm afraid Billy here is feeling a little sick. Could you get me an ice-cold wash cloth? And some Dramamine or whatever you call it up here. Gravol?"

"The wash cloth I can get, but we don't have much in the way of an emergency kit, and there are no anti-nausea meds in it."

"You're kidding. In an eating establishment, you have no medication for nausea? It's over-the-counter you know, not something that requires a prescription."

"Yes ma'am, I know, and I can tell you that I wish we did because I could use some myself these last several days."

"Alright then. The washcloth will have to do."

"I'll be right back. Is there anything else I can get you?"

"How about news. You've got people coming in here. Are they telling you anything? How about that couple over there?"

"Actually, what you see right now is a crowd. No one has anything new to tell. It's exactly like what you said you'd seen yourself."

"But you've got electricity, and no one else does. Anything on TV or radio or the Internet?"

"I'm afraid not, sir. Everyone's off the air, and the Internet went down right away. Never came back up."

"Maybe it's better back home. Maybe they just weren't prepared for ... this, whatever this is."

"Yes ma'am, that could be but we had a trucker in here yesterday who said the other side of the border is the same."

"Where did he go? Did he mention where he was going?"

"No, ma'am, he didn't. He came back to get his wife and kid. They live in town. Listen, let me go get that ice-cold washcloth. Billy's lookin a little a green in the gills. Be just a minute."

Alice pushes through the door to the kitchen. "Ernie, I think I'm gonna be sick."

"Nausea again?"

"Yeah, you think this could be more than just a bad case of nerves?"

An old gypsy woman told my fortune when I was 24. She said she saw a beast, and when she looked at me she shivered. I recall having that effect on others, and it gave me a feeling of power and I took pleasure in that. She described red and white houses on the mountainside crumbling as the ground shook and a river flowing through it muddy red. Blue heads would come from far away but they would just watch and then leave. There was a window with a view of a great city on a vast sea, but it was a cold sea. From that window my future would unfold.

My grandpa had told me stories about life here before I was born. As I grew old older—old enough to read—I began to wonder whether he was telling me the truth. There were dragons and other beasts, and there was fire and loud explosions. The dragons destroyed many houses and churches, and the beasts lived in the houses that remained standing. My parents told him to stop telling me stories or he'd have to leave. I didn't want him to leave, so I never brought up the stories with my parents again.

It was in my last year of law school—my grandpa had passed away many years earlier—that I consulted the Romani woman he'd told me about. I humoured his memory and visited her expecting her to speak in the mysterious way my grandpa had. She didn't disappoint. There were monsters and devastation, but oddly enough she mentioned a land of blond people who lived in perpetual fear of a terrible and cold sea, which she said I would soon see from high in the sky. I thanked her and paid her double her fee, for I had learned from my grandpa to value the old ways, even though I was a modern and didn't believe village superstitions.

One of my first cases was in The Hague, and it was a cold February day when I first saw the defendant. From his dossier that I had read meticulously, I recall a witness reporting having seen him once in Toronto, "a heavyset, silver-haired main in a double-breasted black mink coat waving his arms dismissively at the cars as he crossed the street to the consulate shoving his way through the crowd, scattering men, women, and children as if they were chickens."

The words of my grandpa and the old Romani woman were alive, and now I wondered whether I was up to doing battle in court against this vampire.

The freighter was down. The electromagnetic storm had caused system-wide malfunctions in telemetry and stabilization equipment rendering the ship blind and unmaneuverable for a soft landing, so the craft crashed into a rocky declivity on the dark side of the planet. A systems check discovered that the autopilot had been damaged, which meant that manual take-off would be required. According to company regulations, only a certified space freighter pilot was permitted to bypass autopilot, and the of the two certified pilots, the captain was in a coma and the first officer was suffering from an space-induced anxiety attack, and she was currently under the care of the art therapist and therefore unavailable to perform any command decision-making. The navigator—a matter-of-fact and often terse personality—was in charge.

"Anybody object?" he asked. No one did.

A situational assessment ordered by the navigator reported that while food, water, and medical provisions were adequate for a month or longer, the on-board breathable air environment could only be maintained for three days on account of the failure of the oxygenator for which there were no spare parts. After three days, everyone would die.

Telemetry readings were back online and indicated that the ship was approximately 28,000 kilometres from the human settlement where terraforming was in progress to create a livable world underground for this planet whose atmosphere was toxic. Since freighters don't carry shuttles or other transportation vehicles that can cover 28,000 kilometers in three days, and since the communications officer had been unable to hail anyone from the human settlement that was not only underground but

also halfway around the planet, the prospects for survival looked grim, and the navigator didn't pretend otherwise.

Under the new Safe Space Commerce law, all long-distance spacecraft were now staffed with an art therapist whose sole function was to manage the mental health of the crew on lengthy voyages without medication as much as possible. These medical practitioners of the arts were trained in the visual, auditory and kinesthetic arts as well as psychotherapy techniques such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy for the treatment of space-related anxiety disorders and chronic depression. The first officer's prognosis was not hopeful. Cases like hers could require weeks to restore the patient to some semblance of normality.

That left it to the navigator to get the freighter into the air and as close to the terraforming base as possible. The rest of the crew—a crusty and unruly lot when planet side—were, when faced with the harsh laws of space travel, willing to trust. And so the engineers and technicians went to work to ensure that the vessel would be space-worthy at the navigator's direction.

The repairs took two-and-a-half days, the freighter's two senior officers remained disabled, and the oxygenated atmosphere on board was T-minus four hours away from critical depletion ... and asphyxiation. The first engineer signaled "Clear for take-off," and the freighter's engines revved and groaned as the ship tried to pull free. Calculations for gravity had underestimated the thrust required for lift-off, and the ship struggled and failed to leave the surface. "There's no more power to get us up," said the voice of first engineer approaching the bridge.

"Are you getting anything from com?" asked the navigator who had turned to the communications officer. "Nothing."

"It's a long shot, but can we get a thermal scan of the surface to see if there's any sign of changing heat differentials?"

"Checking that right now," answered the com officer.

(Pause)

"I'm getting something—a large energy source moving east-southeast approximately 50 kilometers due south."

"Engineer, you've got the helm. I'm going out in the lander to find what's out there. I have a hunch it might be tunneling equipment, and I hope to the deity of the day that I'm right."

"Hey, wake up buddy? You gotta leave. You're on private property, and you're trespassin."

Lying on the dusty canyon floor, an old, shrunken man uncurled from a fetal position and slowly rose to his feet with the help of weathered wooden crutch. He took in his questioner bit by bit, starting from the bottom before fixing on a pair of spoon-sized silver eyes that reflected part of the sky and surroundings. No answer.

"How long have you been livin out here, all alone like this?"

The old man staggered, nearly losing his balance when he stuck the crutch out to flick away a hairy scorpion that appeared to have been keeping him company. No answer.

"Where'd you get that wound? Looks infected."

The old man collapsed and fell backwards landing on his skinny bottom. Groaning, he pulled his legs closer and sat crossed-legged, then turned his attention to the blood stains on his upper right arm. No answer.

"Well, if you won't speak, Mister, I'm gonna call 9-1-1 and get an ambulance out here."

The old man's eyes opened wider as if in alarm but he still didn't answer.

"Yeah, operator this is Brent Hansen. Is this Wanda? Hey, Wanda. I'm over at the box canyon about 30 miles north of the county highway.... Yep, you're gonna need the chopper for

sure.... There's an old man who's suffered overexposure. Looks like he's been out here by himself for several days..... Yeah, he's conscious.... No, he's not talkin. Don't know if he can't or won't... He's got an injury on his arm—nothin too serious. I can clean it up.... Yeah, I have some fresh water.... No, I know. Not too much and not too fast. Know the drill, Wanda.... Alright. Thanks, Wanda, and say hello to the sheriff next time you see him. Tell him I owe him one for the good word he put in for me with the governor.... Bye now.

"It'll probably take a while, so if your tongue loosens in the meantime, I'm not goin anywhere. Meantime, I got a first aid kit in the cab, and I'll fix you up for now....

"Everybody's got a story to tell, Mister, and you probably got a doozy, out here in the open sky 50 miles from where anybody ordinarily would pass.... Just hold still. This may sting a bit....

"Wouldn't have found you except for that wall there. Saw it from my airplane earlier this mornin and wondered what the devil that was all about....

"You're gonna be facin a lot of tough questionin real soon, but it's so goddamned hot out here, I'm gonna cut you some slack. Have some water. It's good, pure spring water, not that fluoride shit they drink in town."

He offered the old man a canteen, and the old man reached out and took it in both hands and started drinking.

"Take it easy. Don't wanna drink to fast or it'll be comin up and you don't look like your body can stand too much retchin....

"Got a tarp in my truck and I'll set up a bivouac to get us outta the sun while we wait. You stay put—guess that wasn't necessary, since you ain't goin nowhere fast....

"Here, lemme help you over to the truck. You don't need to be out in this sun no more. It can kill a man. Heat stroke can come up on you sudden like, and if there ain't no one around you can end up a bleached-white skeleton like that one over yonder."

The old man handed the canteen back ... empty.

"There's more if you want some, but I think you probably drank enough for now....

"It was about 20-25 minutes ago I called. They gotta be comin soon. You got a bad sunburn and are dehydrated, but you'll be fine in a couple a days. I've heard that folks who get dehydrated get kinda confused and even hallucinate, so I expect that could be why you ain't talkin....

"Don't know how much you been able to understand, but just hang in there. The paramedics'll be here shortly.... Shoulda been here by now for Christ's sake....

"I'm still wonderin what the hell you were up to with that wall. Was that some kinda hut you were makin? That wouldna made much sense if you knew what kinda creatures we have out here—snakes and scorpions like the one you that spent the night with you—and they'd have liked the cool, darkness as much as you and wouldna been the kinda company you'd wanna keep your back to. You were damn lucky last night....

"Chopper's comin. Bout damn time.... Hey, settle down. They're just paramedics. They'll take you back to the hospital so you can be treated proper. That wound. That's still got me puzzled.

Looks like you were pickin at your flesh to dig somethin out. I didn't see no foreign objects in there. I dunno. These guys'll take care of you. They're good men. I know em both....

"Hey, Frank, Tom.... Yeah, he's stable. Got an arm injury of some sort, bad sunburn and he's still dehydrated and weak and seems confused."

Tom motions to keep their voices lower, and then whispers.

"You're shittin me. He's a what?" speaking more softly.

Tom repeats what he's just said.

"Damn. I guess I'm lucky as hell to be alive. Jesus Christ!"

The pilot having had enough yelled 'Shut up!', and while the onion was only half-done, Professor Kozlov, who had been chewing each layer methodically as he expostulated on how eating an onion was analogous to scientific research, abruptly stopped—mid-chew, mid-sentence. No one requested an 18-month assignment to the Russian military based at Nagurskoye in the 191-island Franz Josef Archipelago (aka The Gulag). Who would? It was the High Arctic near the top of the world—extremely cold, dark, remote and endlessly boring, especially with a jabbering scientist who ate goddamned raw onions. And with ICBMs that could strike any city in America, was it really necessary anymore? Rumour had it that Putin never even visited the base. It had been a look-alike.

He was known in town as the mourner, because he attended graveside funeral services regardless who the deceased was. He wasn't a professional mourner—no one paid him any attention let alone a gratuity. It was a very small town and everyone knew everyone else. There are more eccentrics than you'd think in a small town. Probably more than you'll ever find in a big city. That's because our networks crisscross every single day, sometimes planned but sometimes unpredictably and in so many different contexts. You get to see so many dimensions of the same people, and that just doesn't seem possible with the thousands upon thousands of interactions in an ever-changing sea of faces in the city.

It was obvious when he attended funerals on the other side of town. He stood out like toothpaste on a black funeral dress. On this side, he was just another shade of white on a paint sample. While he knew many of the deceased personally, there were quite a few outside and beyond his ken for a variety of reasons, but even when his knowledge or memory was sketchy, over the course of the service he would often overhear enough to assemble a brief biography.

———————

Yesterday morning, I attended a funeral for one of the town's first families. I didn't know the person, but during the service, I happened to hear several conversations, including some that I don't think I, or anyone else, was meant to hear, like the one about the county contract for road repairs. I had no idea there was so much money in that line of business. Of course, there was the usual gossipy talk about affairs ... and not business affairs. They change partners so often—it's like a great dance

party, only it's done secretly ... so they think. Everybody knows everything about everybody, but people still get surprised when their dirty laundry gets out in public. Kinda funny—in two ways—to see a couple going to church together on Sunday morning, when on Saturday night they were coupling with someone else. What is particularly disturbing is when the relatives start talking over the will before the corpse is even in the ground. But then there are good things I hear ... sometimes. Often it's from a much older person who remembers some of the more innocent moments from the deceased's youth. In the deceased's case, there was the fourth grade geography teacher, a teammate from the high school football team, a girlfriend who'd been treated better than most, and the town librarian. He was apparently a big reader. The most touching was the story about how he taught his crippled granddaughter to ride a horse. She'd been scared to death by big animals, partly because she was so petite herself. The wife of the deceased—number three someone said—was there. She was stunning and must've been only in her early forties. Very formal and correct. She didn't look at all like a widow. The priest was young and nervous. Looked like he hadn't seen too many off. It was on its way to being a hot, sweltering day, and the sweat beaded on the clergyman's forehead and upper lip. Just as he opened his Bible to read a pre-selected passage, the book slipped out of his hands and tumbled into the grave. The sudden hush was deafening. Someone handed the priest another one. A good thing, because I couldn't see anyone climbing into the grave to retrieve that holy book. That was really the only flaw, except for one slip when the priest referred to the deceased as 'James.' Turns out James was the younger brother and the black sheep.

———————

I buried my Paulie yesterday. They put us in this here sunny spot at the far end of the cemetery where poor folks go. There ain't no shade trees in this part.

It was just me and the gravediggers and they was standin way back. Paul hanged himself. My baby boy. The preacher said he had demons, but I reckon he had one of them psychology problems. Needed medicine but wouldn't have none. Stubborn as mule that boy just like his old pa. Least he wasn't no drunk. But he was tormented. You could read it in his face. Tormented—that was the exact word he used, the preacher did. Deep down I was afraid. I felt like I knew it would come to this. Poor Paulie. My only child.

I wasn't alone long before that strange old man who hangs around the graveyard came up and spoke to me. He asked if he could join me if he just kept quiet. Didn't wanna be rude, but I told him I wasn't objectin so long as he wasn't lookin for company. So, he stood there. In the hot afternoon sun. He didn't speak, I didn't speak. For some reason, I didn't feel ashamed of crying in front of him, and I cried a whole lot that afternoon.

"Ma'am. It's gonna be sundown soon, and we gotta finish up here. We don't mean to hurry you, but ....

"Thank you gentlemen. I'm sorry. I know I overstayed. I'll be going now. I thank you kindly for puttin my boy to rest."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Sir?" said the other man to the mourner.

"Ah, yes, I'm leaving now as well," responded the mourner.

I felt a hand on my shoulder like a gentle summer breeze, then he turned and walked away in the other direction, towards the last of the day's sun as it ducked below the pine tops. The wings of the cicadas continued into the deep summer evening.

The letter on the kitchen counter read, in part, "You've been accepted." He hadn't needed to read further. It didn't matter; he'd changed his mind.

The surroundings, the routines, the people were all familiar here. He watched the sun rise and set behind the tall buildings or through the trees depending on the season. The heavy rains in spring, people plashing through the torrents, the faithful purple and yellow that were the first to punch through the waking earth and gradually the full panoply of early summer colours before the deep summer drought, and then the rich, deep reds, oranges and yellows of autumn and finally the long, cold nights and the whiteness refreshed now and again to bring forth new generations of snowmen in the schoolyard and hide the dirty snow tracked through by hundreds of buses and automobiles and thousands of pedestrians.

He, himself, was no gardener. He had only a few indoor plants, but they were green and he tended them. Didn't need to own to prize. He was lucky there, since he'd never had much. For all that, he felt needed here—if only to appreciate—but mostly he wanted to remain.

#

"Natural causes?"

"Yeah, if you can call terminal cancer natural."

"That letter's dated four months ago. Must've decided against the hospice."

"Can't say I blame him.... Soil's still damp."

"What?"

"These plants have been watered recently."

In the park on the waterfront, a small, wiry old man whose feet barely seemed to touch the ground was passing the strings to dozens of red, white, blue, green, orange, and purple balloons to a young, blond-haired, blue-eyed man, who, thin and emaciated, seemed to be in a great hurry. The vendor's puzzlement quickly changed to joy, as he eagerly grabbed the crisp hundred dollar notes and wished the thin, young man *bon voyage*.

A moment lasting several minutes made this scene appear awkward in the extreme. A small crowd had formed around the two, and people were watching, anticipating, and beginning to grow restive. Then, on cue (when all the waiting gets cut out), the balloons caught a strong wind from the west and were swept into an updraft carrying them high into the blue sky of a late-summer Saturday afternoon. The sound effects of those left on the ground confirmed a successfully entertaining take-off, and the thin, young man smiled to himself. From his great height, everything looked so different—actually, not so very different, because he'd seen the city many times from this vantage point on flights in and out. But what was different this time was that he had a much longer look at what lay beneath him.

Beyond the park, the city was busy. It was never not busy. Not that he could remember. The roads were thick with vehicles and there were many pedestrians and bicyclists on the go. People on balconies greeted and cheered him as he floated by, having no particular destination in mind—all that entrusted to the vagaries of the invisible wind currents that never reached agreement on speed or direction. Over Varsity Stadium, he watched nearly half a minute of a soccer match until all the players joined the crowd to look up into the bright sun to see

the balloon man pass by. An authoritative voice spoke loudly and sternly to the balloon man directing him to come down ... safely ... and immediately. This elicited boos and shouts, silencing the voice until the shadow passed over and the referee's whistle restarted play.

Moving eastward he was carried over the serpentine highway that tracked the river all the way down to the great lake. Traffic was thickest here. It always seemed to be bumper-to-bumper to those who drove it, but on this day cars had stopped and people had gotten out of their cars not to yell at one another but to look and point at the sky. Here, too, the thin, young man was encouraged by the attention of the people on the ground. Feeling more comfortable in his travels, he freed one hand and waved to those below and behind. His path followed the river for a short distance before he got sucked into the canyons of downtown, and as he grew closer, the his fear grew. Navigating through all these buildings where there were likely to be all sorts of unpredictable and unseen airstreams would be frightening enough, but having no control over direction or speed would raise the intensity of his feelings exponentially. This was no moment for calm reflection. He was panicked, pure and simple.

Fortunately, he remained high enough to miss all but the taller office buildings and condos and of course all the wiring below that which kept the city humming day and night. From some of the office windows far above the city streets, he caught the attention of people working the weekend and enjoyed a delicious but fleeting moment of pleasure as his shadow passed over the bodies of sunbathers on the condo roof terraces. A gust from the north followed by another from the east interrupted his moment, and he and his balloons were blown into a tight corridor headed towards the city's famed telecommunications tower.

An updraft, as if timed for his arrival, carried him aloft where he passed by the observation deck filled with open-mouthed little spectators who pointed and jumped up and down beside their parents. He tracked close to the tower for half-a-minute but it seemed much longer, because a new danger had emerged. He was being drawn in to the tower and quite naturally was imagining an imminent crash. A friendly burst of air pulled him loose and took him out over the open dome where a baseball game was in progress. At this height, he was too far away and too small to be a distraction, and regrettably, he didn't receive the attention he'd hoped for.

Another beneficial push from the east moved him safely off a collision course with the condos on the quay and he headed out to open water. But before he could get completely clear, he and his entourage were sent spinning wildly by the turbulence of a plane taking off from the island airport. He was close enough to feel the heat, and that sudden, alarming sensation cleared away the momentary calm he was expecting from here on. Once past the islands, and far enough out into the lake, he calculated that this was as good a place to get off as any. It had occurred to him that he could pull in the balloons and deflate them one at a time to control his descent. There were myriad sailboats and motor boats in the waters below. He just had to make sure he didn't become a target for one of those cruisers.

The water was cold and unexpectedly hard. It hurt. Some of it got up his nose and sent him into a coughing fit.

Upon subduing the reflex hacking, he opened his watery eyes and looked out at the green. Green? This wasn't the lake. Where was he?

Above the green was a circle of knees—skinny knees, fat knees, white knees, black knees, brown knees, hairy knees and smooth knees. Above that were faces ... faces that matched, and sometimes didn't match, the knees supporting them. As he gradually came to, he noticed that his hands burned and his palms were red. And his arms and shoulders ached tremendously.

The smells of barbecued meat wafted over in the gentle late afternoon breeze and settled on him, and he felt hungry and thirsty. Hungry, for the first time in days. How many days? He licked his parched, dry lips and guzzled the water handed down by a lanky, white arm not spilling a drop. It tasted as good as if it had ducked his head to drink from a cold mountain stream.

The balloons. They'd disappeared. No, when the circle around him loosened and broke up, he saw where they'd gone. The balloons were racing through the park, popping up among the trees, dancing around and through the playground, parading onto the ball fields, and attached were little people of various sizes, shapes and colours.

"Woldemar—"

"Is he the same as Lord Voldemort, Daddy?"

"Who's that, honey?"

"You know the snake-faced man from Harry Potter?

"No, I think this must have been a different Woldemar from long before Harry Potter was born. Anyway, he was a dictator, and he was fat and bald and ugly, and every morning he drank a strawberry and banana milkshake."

"What's a dictator, Daddy?"

"A bad man who hurts lots of other people and takes away their freedoms."

"Is that like the guy in Russia?"

"Yes, honey, like the guy in Russia.

"But he's not fat—maybe short and ugly and bald, but he's the guy that rides around on horseback with no shirt on, isn't he? He doesn't look like someone who'd enjoy a strawberry-banana milkshake. He looks too mean."

"Yes, but let me get back to the story. It's getting late, and you need to go to sleep. Tomorrow is a big day."

"Anyway, there was this revolution, and Woldemar was forced to leave the castle."

"I thought kings lived in castles."

"They do, but Woldemar, he was, uh, sort of a king and a dictator and that's why he had a castle."

"Does the guy in Russia live in a castle?"

"No, not really, but then he isn't a king is he?"

"Oh."

"Anyway, the people wanted a new ruler and so they chased him out of the country. He and several of his men escaped by boarding a ship that sailed far away."

"And did the people chase after them?"

"No, they were just happy that he was gone."

"What happened to them?"

"Well, that's where the story gets interesting. He—"

"No. Not 'him', 'them—'"

"Ah, yes, well they found a new leader now, didn't they?"

"I don't know. Did they?"

"Yes dear. As a matter of fact they did."

"And did they like the new leader?"

"Uh, yes, I suppose so."

"That's good. Because it would be bad if they got rid of one bad guy and then got another bad guy who might even be worse."

"Yes, darling. You're exactly right. But you're making it really hard for Daddy to finish this story, and Daddy's tired, too."

"I'm sorry, Daddy, what happened to the ship and all the people on it?"

"Yes, now this is where the story gets interesting. They were shipwrecked on a small island far away from any people."

"How did the ship wreck? Was it a storm or something?"

"Yes, I think that's exactly what it was. A storm with very powerful winds and waves as tall as the ship. It forced the ship to run aground on dangerous rocks and the waves destroyed the wooden sailing ship and many men were lost."

"I guess Woldemar lived?"

"Yes, he did, but he was the only one who survived."

"So, he probably didn't get to have strawberry-banana milkshakes for breakfast anymore, right Daddy?"

"That's right, dear."

"And how long did he live on the island all by himself."

"Many years if I'm not mistaken."

"How do we know?"

"He kept a journal, kinda like the diary that you keep."

"Did he ever leave the island?"

"Yes, he did. He built a boat from the scraps of the ship that had crashed on the rocky shores, and he put it out to sea on a calm day, and he was rescued by a ship that was passing by."

"He was lucky, then. He kept surviving."

"Yes, he was, but not too lucky because it was a ship from the country he had run away from."

"And what did they do with him?"

"They put him in a brig on the ship and sailed home."

"What's a 'brig'?"

"A jail—a temporary jail that you find on ships where prisoners are kept until the ship returns to land."

"And did they execute him when he returned?"

"Well, there's a happy version and then there's the real version."

"You mean this really happened?"

"Yes, unfortunately it is based on a true story."

"Can I have the happy version, Daddy? I'm really worried about Mommy's surgery tomorrow and I don't think I'll sleep well with the other version."

"Of course, sweetie. And don't you worry about Mommy. She's got the best doctors in the city."

"Daddy, one last thing."

"Yes, what's that?"

"Can I have a strawberry-banana smoothie? Just a small one?"

"If you promise not to tell Mommy,... I'll make you a small one. Will that be alright?"

"Thank you, Daddy. And, can I eat it in bed?"

"Just this once, Princess."

A great storm—-not manifest in rolling thunder and flashing lightning, or in frozen, blinding whiteness, nor in the bits and pieces of lives and life swirling in a funnel cloud—an internal psychic storm that shows itself in broken and twisted limbs, faces distorted by pain and terror, screams of agony and despair, pulsating tremors of errant life and violent convulsions, and the smell of death ... eternal.

A man stands before the painting—a living painting of Dante's *Inferno*—a gruesome mass of groaning, writhing, screaming, spitting, naked humanity in a deep inescapable pit that recedes from view the longer you look at it. Unlike the numberless mass graves of human history, it is different in that it lives and breathes and moves.

"Is this you Europe, again?"

"It is required of you" says a voice.

There is no one else present. The man is alone with himself.

"What ... what is required of me?"

"It is required of you" repeats the voice.

He answers, "No, it is not. I have no obligations here."

"It is required of you."

"No, They chose or were fated. I prefer to think that they chose. Weren't we all endowed with the ability—maybe even the right—to choose? They are pitiful—these ones—but not piti-

able. All no doubt had excuses, villains to blame. The victims' crutch. Perhaps they tried to escape, to achieve ... significance, but now, look at them. They're maggots feeding on their own flesh."

"You misunderstand. You have no choice. I repeat: 'It is required of you.'"

"This isn't real. This is the effect of something I ate or a neurological response to an undetermined environmental stimulus. It will be pass."

"Your stubborn certitude is noted, but *we*'ve only been at this for a few of your minutes. *We* will wait. For *us* time is but one of many dimensions as is space and as are concepts and sensations. Nevertheless, *we* have to communicate with you through those basic media, as you seem to have difficulty comprehending matters as simple as a point or unity or even existence. Naturally, your gestures, vocabulary and grammar, too, are inadequate, but what you call language is how you communicate with one another, and so it is what *we* must use to reach you. Although, you think of *us as* an other existing in your space-time world, you and *we* are not as dichotomous as you imagine.

"I haven't read Kant in decades, and I never cared much for Heidegger, but what do they have to do with your directing me to walk into this painting?"

"We believe the word that fits the situation is 'paraphrase.' *We* paraphrase using the language of your reality."

"You're being evasive.... But here's a question for *you*? If I step through into the painting, then so will *you*, am I right?

"That's accurate enough for *our* purposes."

"And will *you* be eternally destroyed as well?"

"Here, you limit *us*. Destruction implies space and time, and neither fully captures *our* essence ... or yours.

Come, walk with *us.* There is a path beyond, but *we* can tell you no more for now."

"Don't you remember 141 Magnolia Street?"

There really wasn't anything about that apartment that I wanted to remember, and I felt that this was his way of telling me that he thought we could live here.

It was an old, concrete block duplex. Inside it was bare and cold. Walls inside and out painted white but not very recently and not very well. The interior walls were pock-marked from the wall-hangings of no end of tenants. A single, square room. In one corner was a kitchen—sink, counter, an old gas stove, and an even older fridge. About 25 steps along the wall and the next corner was fixed up with a sink, toilet and curtainless shower. At the back of the room was a second door that opened to an alley and a window that looked out on the alley and showed several colors that appeared to have covered the glass at one time or another.

"The Red Line is just two blocks down the street, and door-to-door is about 50 minutes to downtown. And did you notice the canopy of trees overhanging the road? Can you imagine what fall will look like in a few months? And then in the spring, our cherry blossoms."

At that moment, I was thinking about the low-ball salary he'd been offered and the ridiculous rent for this room. God, the slumlords from our college town were here, too. The agent's physiognomy in profile suggested a bird of prey.

"There's a very nice park about four—"

Gunshots—three of them—pierced the relative quiet of this busy suburb. The agent hit the floor and whispered loudly for us to the same. Light, rapid footsteps just outside the backdoor could be heard in the alley, followed half a minute later by heavy breathing and a slower tread. More gunshots. Screams from a short distance away in the direction of the metro.

"Where the hell are the cops? I hope someone's called."

"Just stay down. They'll be here soon."

Another gunshot, and more screams. This time it seemed that the bullet had found its mark.

"You call this a safe neighbourhood? Would you bring up a child in a place like this?"

"Calm—."

"Don't tell me to calm down. There's a shooting just outside this apartment, and you told us—we asked specifically—that this was a good neighbourhood."

"And it is. It isn't a high crime—"

"So, moderate crime? Is that what you thought we'd find acceptable?"

"As I was about to say, the parts of the city where you would feel safest are just too far beyond your budget. It isn't realistic."

"Honey, this isn't going to work. We're not going to have a baby in a place like this."

"But dear, the job— This is the first offer I've had in six months. I'm sure we can keep looking and find something."

"No, dear. We've got to think of all three of us. You can go back and do grad studies. You know you'll at least be able to get a TAship, and besides you're profs thought you needed a more advanced degree anyway. I can live at 141 Magnolia if this is the alternative."

Sirens, from two directions, wailed in the distance, getting closer and closer.

"Seven-and-a-half minutes! Is that what you'd call a good response time?"

"Yes ma'am. Actually, that's about what I'd expect."

"And in your neighbourhood?"

"It's strictly a matter of economics. I'm sure your husband can appreciate that."

"Yes, we've both heard quite enough of Mr. Reagan's trickle-down economics, and if this is what it looks like—"

An immunologist is not a bad person to have on board a mission of exploration given that indigenous life might have some practical value before it is exposed to foreign pathogens and decimated in short order—an extreme case of the principle that observer interference disturbs and distorts the prior condition of the subject, however inadvertent, introducing an unknown degree of uncertainty to the initial knowledge of the subject.

That was part of the sales pitch she used to get on board the riverboat. A previously-unrecorded tribe had recently been spotted by a reconnaissance plane, and the boat was going upstream towards the headwaters to locate and communicate with (or 'pacify' in the words of the surly captain) the people.

The other part had been more convincing for the captain and his crew. With the moral support of the paymaster and a small contingent of heavily-armed mercenaries in camouflage fatigues, she persuaded captain and crew that her studies of the native environment and peoples would benefit the expedition's funders—an international consortium of mining companies who were keen to tap the vast copper reserves of the river basin in a sort of *jeux sans frontières* on this ethnologically diverse island so remote from social and technological systems prevalent elsewhere on Earth. Estimates as high as 800 numbered the documented languages spoken here, and the sheer complexity of communication with such a vast number of linguistic groups was an important factor in uniting the efforts of such a disparate group of nations as South Africa, Australia, China, Chile, the U.S. and the U.K.

Now, in social situations she was very nearly describable as a wallflower, but when it came to her work, that shyness evapo-

rated like a morning mist. With the captain and crew, she held her own and brooked no affected politeness and certainly no masculine condescension. Their employers had sent a clear message to the curmudgeonly captain and his roguish hands that the immunologist's report would be very important for the environmental impact statement that had to pass the review of the PNG Government and its NGO advisors who were already skeptical of the entire enterprise, one of whom characterized it as "a rape of one of Earth's last unexploited human habitats."

The captain, two translators and the immunologist were aboard the rowboat that made first contact with a tribe for whom no records existed. (It is unknown whether this was the tribe identified by the flyover.) On approaching one of the outlying buildings near the riverbank, the captained hailed a thunderous 'Hello!' which the translators repeated in several different languages and dialects. Silence. Then, three soft whistles sliced through the humid air, marking the trajectory of three separate arrows each of which pierced the throat of one of the party's speakers.

The immunologist was all alone with warriors on both sides of the river, bows stretched to the ready. Delirium and panic seized her, and for a full two minutes the warriors remained motionless and soundless, bows cocked.

"Hello?" came a distinctly different voice pattern, but not from the boat.

Moving in front of the row of archers, a man of matte silver emerged, and all the bows were lowered.

Olaf lay there, still, half on and half off the zebra-patterned sofa in his trailer and didn't open his eyes until the ringmaster's assistant slapped him repeatedly in the face to wake him. Not unused to this kind of circus roughhousing, Olaf instinctively grabbed at the man's knees, encircling them in his arms and squeezed as hard as he could until the man lost his balance and toppled over striking his head on the corner of the glass coffee table, ending up face down in the plush white carpet turning red.

The lion taming act would be canceled again ... for the third night in a row and the second night of declining ticket sales. The ringmaster had no choice. The show had to go on. The magician, who had worked with the big cats in another circus, had been champing at the bit to expand his act in tribute to Siegfried and Roy, so the lion trainer was fired and evicted from the camp, and the new lion tamer-illusionist was given the keys and set to debut that night. Sign painters were driven hard to create the life-size announcements that would draw a profitable crowd.

The trailer was ransacked for every tip or trick that could be transferred to the new owner, and the find was discovered locked away in a refrigerated container. A small vial of liquid, labeled 'Emergency Use Only!' in small print. Having worked with lions and tigers before, the magician knew that lion tamers kept closely guarded secrets about special scents that could be used to great effect if properly applied, and so unscrewing the lid and carefully wafting the odor of its contents, he was convinced that this would trigger the climax of his performance.

The tent for the evening's main event was packed. The marketing had worked. The signs, the rumors that had been circulated in town had brought an overflow crowd. It was noisy ... the noise of unsated anticipation or maybe just bloodlust. The ringmaster urged on by the townies exaggerated his own performance beyond what any of the cirkies had ever seen. Everyone was on edge.

All went dark—pitch black. Seconds passed. The light—brighter than before—burst out to the accompaniment of the brass band. In the middle ring of the great tent stood the magician in tuxedo and black cape and the lion, majestic and unrestrained, on its dais.

In the crowd, unchecked by his former co-workers was the lion tamer in the disguise of an old hunchback. In the tight fist of his right hand was a small unlabeled vial of fluid separated into thin layers of rainbow colours. He'd never thought he'd need to use it, but tonight he knew he would. Edging as close to the front as such a one can in a mesmerized but increasingly impatient crowd, he gradually drew himself up to full height, shook the vial vigorously and uncapped it, then threw it in the direction of the beast.

There were exclamations of choking and disgust as the pungent smell was unleashed, no one taking notice of the man who disappeared to the back of the tent. The vial rolled at the feet of the great cat, and its powerful nose drew the scent in deeply. An acutely worried look froze on the magician's face—sabotaged, and he knew it.

The lion raised itself and stood on all fours, and as if on cue—from somewhere—walked a precise circle around the dais,

leaped onto it, and then leaped high in the air vanishing through an enormous rent in the canvas top of the tent.

The lion was never recovered. Hunters from hundreds of miles around scoured the county for days hoping for a trophy like none they'd ever imagined possible for poor, ordinary folk. No trace, no trail, no clues.

The hunters cursed PETA, but the organization denied any knowledge of the goings-on, though a spokesperson was not displeased at the thought that it might have been a one in a million safe escape.

The circus never recovered from its financial loss, and lots of angry cirkies hounded the ringmaster, quite literally, to death for their lost wages.

A year later, the town was blessed with the opening of a roller derby arena, and no one ever gave another thought to the circus that had come to town.

In the year 2234 CE—78 ME (Martian Era)—prior to being admitted to the ICE (Immigration Control and Enforcement) facility of the Martian Commune, visitors and others must pass through a lengthy decontamination corridor. They do so at their own risk as the decontamination technology can interfere with life support systems, such as pacemakers, insulin regulators, prostheses, 'smart' visual, auditory and olfactory aids, and a variety of microchip implants used for identification, monitoring, autonomic overrides, etc.

The man—and indeed he was a human otherwise he would have been denied entry as non-carbon-based humanoids were not permitted to pass between Novlando and the Martian Commune since they posed a high risk of sabotage given the history of 'infections' on Mars—was carrying a large hockey equipment bag filled with the imperial currency used in Novlando. The man failed to conceal his nervousness.

The exchange rate between the Commune and Novlando was always unfavourable as the Commune had erected a currency wall to restrict the movement of people. The entry fee to the Commune fluctuated as the need to tighten or loosen controls required, but at present it was at a 78-year record high.

Evgard, the man from Novlando, had grossly, perhaps fatally, miscalculated. He was short more than 200,000 currency units owing to the most recent exchange rate adjustment, and the Commune border agents—all humanoid robots—never negotiated. Except that today, a human was present—an ambassador on a routine visit to Novlando.

The ambassador overheard the exchange between Evgard and the robot border guard and approaching Evgard and the border guard, sought to intervene, thinking this might imbue his mission with feelings of mutual goodwill between the two Martian worlds.

However, before he could finish articulating his case to the robot, he received an urgent telepathic message from the Office of the Central Committee. "Ambassador, you must refrain from interfering. This man," the message continued, "must pay the fee in full. He is a capitalist. There are no exceptions for the capitalist exploiters of Novlanda." The message concluded with the Commune's benedictory sign-off, "From each according to his ability to each according to his needs."

The ambassador grew in fury as he received this message, and in his agitation and frustration cursed loudly, "Damn that 'from all to each according to his rank' bull—"

"Sir, I must remind you that you are audible to the visitor," responded the robot border guard who then turned to Evgard and said, "You shouldn't have heard that."

Evgard shook himself to attention, puzzled, and for no apparent reason, looked over at the ambassador and noted that the man hadn't spoken a word since he'd arrived, not that an ambassador would deign to speak to a capitalist ... and certainly not to an asylum seeker.

Jo Mike stood at the foot of the grave and read from a heavily-creased sheet torn from a yellow legal pad, his wrists visibly chafed from the handcuffs.

Lane's mother and sister left the room, leaving Jo Mike's lawyer—a Mr. Grimes brought in from Atlanta—and the sheriff to sort out the details. Mr. Grimes went to the county jail and met privately with his client. He passed Jo Mike a legal pad and a blue pen to write out what he planned to read. Jo Mike took the pad and pen wrote feverishly for several minutes in a ragged script that only he could decipher. He filled half a page then ripped out the sheet, folded it four times and stuffed it in his pants' pocket. Mr. Grimes said "I have to read it ... I promised the family I would," so reluctantly Jo Mike pulled out the note and handed it over. The lawyer smoothed out the paper, glanced at the penmanship and asked him to read it aloud. Jo Mike complied. Mr. Grimes asked one question, "Are you sure?" Jo Mike blinked and nodded once, then waved him away and lay face down on the bed ending the interview.

The sheriff's deputy, searching by flashlight, had found Jo Mike sitting underneath an old oak tree where Lane's limp body lay in a tangle of rope. Jo Mike wouldn't speak so the deputy cautioned him and brought him to the county jail until such time as they could sort out what had happened.

One of the boys cut the rope and the body collapsed to the ground like a sack of potatoes. Looking over at Jo Mike who hadn't budged, the boy yelled out, 'Hey Jo Mike, think Daddy would get us off with that fancy-talkin Yankee lawyer?" His buddies' raucous laughter provoked no response. The boy who cut down the body reached into the cooler and finding no more

beer called for a beer run. Since the boys were finished for now, they piled into the pickup and sped away sending clouds of red dust into the air to settle on the bodies under the oak.

Jo Mike stood there ... silently watching when the truck pulled away raising the man off the ground, the body jerking spasmodically as if to gain its footing.

This time the boys, drunk and rowdy as always, had a stranger with them—a black man probably somewhere close to the same age as their daddies. He was trussed up and was being dragged over towards a large, old oak tree. A rope had been strung across a large horizontal branch of the sprawling southern live oak, one end attached to the ball hitch of the pickup and the other dangling near the ground. The three of them struggled with their impaired balance to hold the man fast as they pulled the noose down over his head. Jo Mike watched from a distance in silence. Once their victim had been secured, the boys stumbled over to the truck belly-laughing at the man who now wasted his final words in the dusky light of day in this downstate peanut capital whose other claim to fame was its reputation as the 'hanginest county in Georgia outside Fulton County.'

Jo Mike knew these boys and he was afraid of them, just like most folks were. They were drunks and troublemakers—country hooligans—from the county across the river. They knew him, too. Most folks did. Son of the lawyer who'd hired that big shot defense lawyer, Melvin something or other, from San Francisco, way back. But in this part of the country most folks knew one another—nothing unusual there. That was just the way it was. And that dusty black F-150 they rode in—it looked like most others except that next to the rebel flag decal

on the rear window of the cab there was a black swastika, hand-painted.

A foreman on one of the mega peanut farms, Lane often had to run the gauntlet in town, being a conspicuous black man and a bit too uppity besides ... in the prevailing view. He'd met these boys before and lots just like them over the years, but he'd never been cornered like today ... surrounded and held at bay by three white boys angry with drink and armed with 12-gauge shotguns on an out-of-the-way parcel of fallow land long past quitting time.

Lane kissed his wife good-bye in the morning and walked his two daughters to the elementary school, just like he did every day. He wouldn't see them again until after dark. Originally a 'negro school,' after desegregation, it had ended up becoming an elementary school right in the middle of the black side of town where white folks now, according to the dictates of the courts, had to send their kids.

It was going to be another dry day ... no rain in the forecast, short-term or long-term. Old-timers claimed that droughts were more common and lasted longer than they used to. But you could still just about taste the sweet dust of peanut country in the air.

The 'good-times' economy had been a vague and distant memory. Now, this had pretty much been the state of affairs for the bottom half of society since forever, but the demise of self-regulating markets made news because it was the middle layer that was then experiencing profound debilitating pessimism.

The belief in unending material progress and socio-economic mobility had been shaken to the core. People were locked into what they had and what they could hold onto with 'tooth and claw.' Social consciousness had never been held in such disrepute and contempt. The name 'Hobbes' kept coming up in the political discourse of the day whether in Parliament or Tim Hortons or any place of gathering in between.

Often it has been the case throughout human history that a leader emerges during times of crisis or in this case extreme social lethargy. And so one did. And the people—his subjects as he benevolently referred to them—loved him, partly because they thought they had chosen him and partly because he promised an end to the grand funk the nation was in.

A wise leader, or, a leader who wishes to stay in power, understands the critical importance of managing expectations, and this one was a stellar leader by that standard. Always one or more steps ahead of the crowd, by his account, he set the agenda and changed it as it suited him—rather as it resonated with his subjects. He likened it to reading and exploiting the powerful vagaries of the winds and waves of a mighty ocean.

That was how these great walls came to be. The people needed a focal point for their anxiety, and the leader, ever sensitive to favourable opportunities, agreed to wall off the nation

against outsiders. Outsiders—foreigners—were to be identified as the source of the nation's malaise. Now, for the ordinary person, foreigners had been those who wanted to enter the country and take wealth away from legitimate citizens or they had been foreign nations and their commercial extensions who sought to accumulate wealth at the expense of weakened nations.

Building the walls—north and south only, for large oceans buffered the east and west—became the grandest of all national development programs, far outstripping those of the empires to the east and west which had transformed their backwards agrarian communities to powerful urban and industrial societies in a matter of a few short decades. In these empires, few had questioned the orthodox histories of the transformative era, and so the famines, wars and their attendant casualties were regarded as the stuff of groundless conspiracies propagated by enemies of the nation.

The leader knew his history, rather he knew the secret history of powerful leaders who before him had not just changed the course of history but had created it according to plan, and he emulated them in their then-rehabilitated historical roles. Asked by an impertinent reporter—whose credentials were rescinded within the hour—whether he would entertain a transfer of power in keeping with the nation's traditions, he emphatically replied, "Never," hastening to add extemporaneously that a great nation on its knees could only be restored to greatness if directed by one person, who, with great vision and single-minded focus, could bring about the changes required if unhindered by opposition and its inevitable inefficiencies and delays.

And so today, tourists can visit these walls, as magnificent as the Great Wall of a much earlier time, and they can pass from

one side to the other. However, visitors, to this day, are not permitted to enter the vast underground network of electronic surveillance that had distinguished this 21st century 'Great Impenetrable Wall' from its 'primitive' ancestor.

"I don't need any sleep. This work must be finished before I leave. It's what's expected."

The old archivist hacked away in a remote and dimly lit room in the byzantine underground chambers of the old manor house, clouded in tobacco smoke. She'd been the lord's archivist for going on 60 years now, and her eyesight could no longer be adequately corrected by the thick lenses she'd worn for decades. Her hearing was practically gone, not that it mattered because there wasn't much to hear down here. Her olfactory sense was defunct, and that was a blessing because the air she breathed down here and the food they served gagged the servants.

In the centre of the square room which was rather large—measuring roughly 625 square feet, she'd once estimated—was nothing but a table, a chair and a pendant light with a sooty shade that focused the 60-watt bulb on her work area. In the shadows of the walls behind her and to her left and right were stacks of books, manuscripts and papers collected over the centuries by the lord's ancestors. Her own work—a catalogue in no less than 60 volumes, each heavy and unwieldy—was arranged on thick oak shelves on the wall opposite and was frequently consulted with the assistance of a lighted candle.

Over the decades, the archivist had recorded much of the history of the religions of her lord's lands and those of the neighbouring lands. It was her singular focus, but in her mind it was the history of the world above *in toto*.

She had recorded in great detail this world's religions ... but only up to a point. At that point in the distant past for which

there were no records, her knowledge terminated in a fathomless abyss of darkness. One could only 'speculate,' as her lord put it, about origins, but that she was not permitted to do. Her early 'speculations' had been taken away and burned, and she had been severely chastened for straying from the 'facts.' Certain inferences she had drawn from the annals—conclusions reached after much study and deliberation—raised questions about the lord's Lord and its all-encompassing truthfulness and utility.

Stealthily, her heretical findings had been memorized and carefully recited to ensure the fidelity of her knowledge. In her research, she had learned why the three major religions of the present day—symbolized by the circle, the square, the triangle—were so incompatible. The circle represented infinite recurrence, the square, permanence and stability, and the triangle transcendence, but all shared in common a sense of completeness ... i.e., a sense that there was no thing, no essence beyond their ken. Furthermore, each regarded the 'other' as a danger ... a danger that threatened to pollute and contaminate the true reality and therefore had to be conquered and destroyed.

For example, in the words of one scholar loosely affiliated with the religion of the triangle, the religion of the square had 'bloody borders.' She had studied the writings of others who regarded the cross as a sword, their adversaries regarding the crescent moon as a sickle-shaped weapon, and their rivals, in turn, seeing the isosceles as symbol of death by piercing. The star, representing a deviant hybridization of the circle and the triangle, represented a weapon for bludgeoning—most effective in close combat. So much the archivist could confirm from the historical reports; however, what became blindingly obvious was that these martial descriptions were equally applicable to all

three—the circle, the square, and the triangle along with all their fusions and morphisms.

Even more surprising was the discovery that the connection between the military and religion was not just a phenomenon of a more primitive past. It was true today as much as it had been thousands of years ago. In fact, over the course of recorded human history, there was considerable evidence that the military and religion had been in collaboration from the beginning. Inasmuch as religion required exclusivity and domination, the military provided the means to achieving universality and hierarchy. While the scholarship and the technology grew ever more sophisticated over the millennia, the fundamentals remained timeless.

When the old archivist passed, the lord thought that all the heresy had died with her, but he failed to consider the oral history that had been carefully passed on in coded language to certain trusted servants. Nevertheless, the thoroughgoing ascendancy of written history over oral histories ensured that whatever truth there was in the old archivist's secret communications they would never effectively challenge the written word.

"Is anyone there?"

They used to listen to my stories. They used to repeat my stories to their young. The used to talk to me, to sing to me, sometimes to invoke my blessings and curses.

Now, it's grown too quiet. They were noisy and loud and extremely violent and profane. They were vain, stubborn, rebellious often contesting my authority. They were happy, they were sad, they were hopeful, they were despairing. They were a lot of trouble, but without them it feels empty and cold and lonely. The will to survive, to overcome, to conquer, to build, to destroy—it's gone.

The planets, moons, asteroids, comets, suns, solar systems, galaxies must still be there, and action, reaction, change, persistence must continue, but I cannot sense any of this.

I am ... I think. But according to the stories that humans told me that could just be an echo ... from the past. But even an echo exists in the dimension of time as does the hearing of the echo. And if the echo—as sound or vibration—is the result of mechanical action as people used to think, can such action exist without a medium? And can such a medium exist without spatial coordinates?

If all that remains are echoes, can they really exist apart from a succession of moments over a range of places? Perhaps the thought of the echo can occur outside time and space, but can the thinking of the thought exist apart from time and space? Humans had difficulty languaging about thinking that neither

began nor ended and objectified what was located 'no where.' There was much in their stories that I could not understand.

How to describe the echo—how is it sensed and what is it about the echo that is sensed not to mention who hears it? If there is an echo, must there be one to hear the echo or is an echo the sort of thing that can exist apart from its being perceived? Is the echo real in some sense that is prior to and independent of whether someone also hears it? And if it is, as is related in the story of human physics, then the sound vibrations occur in a succession that can be ordered and through a medium of objects that can be contemplated. But then the story gets confused and confusing as we're back to trying to understand thoughts and thinking apart from the context of time and place for which human languaging was inadequate in the first place.

But humans complicated the story further by pointing out that apprehension and comprehension require two participants—the apprehended (comprehended) and the one who apprehends (comprehends). If the object requires a subject, then does the subject also require an object, i.e., can the subject be an object for itself? The human philosophers' stories were many, varied and inconclusive. One story even maintained that 'existence' was the pre-eminent essence of being, which seems to be extravagantly useless ('tautological' is the word invented for this sort of situation, and humans were generally adept with neologisms but I think it may have been their grammar that was partly to blame), and yet somehow fitting for minds already linguistically-challenged by the concepts of space and time.

On reflection, it seems that they told me stories and even fabricated stories that they claimed I had told them, but I realize

now that I never had any stories to tell, and now I feel trapped in the logic of *their* stories.

I recall one in particular—a foundational story, if you will—which in its many variations over the times and places of human existence ran along the lines that it was a god who created humans in its godlike image. I never quite understood that and always had a affinity for the heretical view that it was humans who created the god in order to explain the world around and inside them. Like I said, it wasn't a popular story among them—it never attracted the legions of believers that had to be corralled and directed to the work of human civilization—nonetheless, it was a story that could not be completely suppressed or eradicated. And, it is the view towards which I lean in the hollowness, solitude and purposelessness I feel without human companionship.

"Is anyone there? Am I or am I not?"

First thing every morning and just before dusk every evening, the chief minister, R. Rossum, takes the emperor, *Flavius Stultimus*, for a carefully monitored walk through the imperial estate. The emperor is not allowed to walk off leash for fear he might disappear. There is great danger to the kingdom and the empire during the season of musth when the emperor's hormones go berserk. Thousands of illegitimate offspring have had to be 'silenced' by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Four Laws. Rumor in the human settlements has it that the android dragnet has let some slip through.

Breaking News

"Massive government data breach by our Ministry of Arrivals and Departures has jeopardized the security of hundreds of refugees seeking asylum here who fear retaliation by the new government in—"

———

"Minister, uh, I'm so sorry I hung up on you. You see, somehow the press got my phone number up here at the—"

"Don't let it happen again. At least I know that you haven't been talking to media. Don't. A com office has been set up to coordinate the government's public response. What you need to do is get your people—your best and most trusted—onto this. You've got five hours before I brief the—"

In the caller's background

"Thank God this isn't a strategic demographic. Election's still three years away, but people can have long memories."

"What? What did she say? Who was that?"

"Never mind. You weren't supposed to hear that. Forget it, I'll take care of it. All you need to know is that the PM is very sensitive to issues that resonate at home. Find out what happened and no leaks. The PM will survive this. Make sure you do, too."

"Understood, ma'am."

"Good. Now, I don't care if it is August, get yourself and your people back here to the capital before the evening news cycle. We're not going to be videoconferencing across cottage country. We're already a laughingstock in diplomatic circles, and we can't—make that, we won't—allow this one to blow up and make us look like a bunch of dumb lumberjacks."

"I'll have my people on it right away, ma'am, and you have my personal assurance that all communications will be via secure lines and that we have plugged all the leaks from last time."

"Good. Call me with what you have at precisely 11:30 a.m. We'll take it from there."

"Where'd you get that wound?"

"A little mix-up at the zoo. Let's get outta here."

"Does it have to do with why we've still got this alien on board?"

"Here, listen. Computer, play conversation from the beginning."

———

> "You'll find that all the papers are in order. Do you mind if I have a look around. It's been 18 months since I was last here?"
>
> "Mr. Jeffords, facility inspections are no longer mandated in the transfer protocol at this station."
>
> "I don't care about your protocol. I always check the living environment for the animals I bring. That's my protocol, Mr.—"
>
> "Eason. Dr. Eason. Behavioural neuroscientist."
>
> "Well then Dr. Eason, the contract that I have with this station permits me to inspect the conditions of the zoo."
>
> "I'm afraid that cannot be arranged, sir."
>
> *Pause Play*

"On cue, two hulking hominids, indigenous to this planet, entered the office, armed with military-grade blasters, expressionless as antiquated 21st century androids."

Resume Play

"Well, then Dr. Eason, with all due respect to your colleagues here, I think that we've reached an impasse. Unless I can check out the facilities here, I will not be off-loading my cargo."

"That beast is the property of this station—your Interstellar account has been credited as of this morning. Security is here purely as a formality to ensure that the transfer takes place smoothly and peaceably."

"And that transaction can be reversed. I know because I've done it before. You must know my reputation. I, however, know nothing about you. What happened to the previous zookeeper?"

"That would be irrelevant. What is pertinent is that all shippers' contracts with the previous stationmaster have been superseded, all shippers have been notified and given their assent to the revised terms—except for you, Mr. Jeffords."

"Well, I didn't receive your communication, and if I had, we wouldn't be having this conversation right now, because I would be in a different quadrant delivering my cargo to a reputable zoo."

"If that's your last word, sir. Security, please detain Mr. Jeffords until the beast can be transported safely to our facility."

———

"That's when I fired my blaster. I always have it set to stun, but those guys were quicker and one of them got off a shot that hit me in the shoulder. Theirs weren't set to stun—low intensity but not—"

"You did what. What the hell were you thinking?"

"What I was thinking is that this guy was no zookeeper and this was no zoo. This was an animal testing laboratory and he was the guy in charge. I've heard about these people and what they do to get their research stipends and get the their papers published."

"So, you grew a conscience down there? Who do you think we are and what do you think we're doing? We're animal escorts. We take exotic and dangerous animals from their native habitats on planets across our galaxy and sell them to zoos. And what do you think zoos do with them? Treat them like pets? Don't be naive. You're too old for that. It doesn't suit you."

"But I do it—have always done it—differently. I've turned down a lot of money whenever I thought something smelled funny. And this didn't just smell funny. It stank!"

"Damn! Now we're stuck with this ... this unnameable creature and no buyers. Who do you think's gonna pay a premium price for an animal that's not even been recorded with the Galactic Zoological Society? The old zookeeper here had always been a risk-taker and had agreed to the transaction, and then you have

his replacement make the same offer. There aren't two others in the galaxy who'd be willing to take a chance on a new species. That reminds me, it's your turn to feed it."

"I told you yesterday that we are running low on food. What do I feed it?"

"Just now thought of that, did you? Well, we know this creature is on a strict carnivore's diet—no substitutions. And we've been through a barnyard full of animals—and by the way, what's it feel like for you when you feed live animals to this monster that's all tooth and claw?"

"Is it true that god is dead?"

"No, but god is dying."

"Why is god dying?

"Because someone tried to kill god."

"Who would do such a thing?"

"Why would anyone do this?"

"Forget about those questions, what do we do now?"

"There is no emergency protocol to follow when god is dying, is there?"

"Could it be hidden in one of the holy books—you know, something that a religious scholar might know?"

"We are three wise men, but we've never read about anything like this in our sacred writings going back millennia. That god could have an ending is unfathomable to us, as scripture tells us that god is by definition eternal."

"What about the astrophysicists whose eyes have penetrated the depth of the galaxies beyond any of our imaginings?"

"We have studied only a fraction of what we think exists and that's at the gigantic end of the mass spectrum. We've seen no evidence that demonstrates conclusively and unequivocally the

existence of god, so we would not be able to comment on god's demise."

"And you quantum physicists who study the fundamental nature of reality in particles or waves (or whatever) that cannot be seen but can only be inferred from your theories and their mathematical representations, can you tell us what has happened to god?"

"No, not with any degree of certainty. In fact, it is almost certain that we will never be able to comprehend more than the probability that god exists, that god is dying or that god is dead."

"How about you philosophers? You've been talking and writing about god, in one way or another, for as long and perhaps even longer than the holy men? What can you tell us about the state of god?"

"Perhaps the only thing that all of us can agree to is that none of us has an exclusive and comprehensive understanding of god, however that idea has been constituted throughout human history. Some believe that the concept of god extends to everything that we don't know and can't know because of our imperfect and incomplete apprehension of reality. Others maintain that god is our creation, a fiction intended for the organization of groups of human beings and the regulation of human behaviour. A few would support the view that god can only be revealed as an occult phenomenon—beyond the natural world—and only as god chooses. Since we lack consensus, all we can offer is metaphysical—or as some would say, metaphorical, while others would say, nonsensical."

"Thank you for your circumlocutionary response. We sense the very real limitations of language and understanding when we listen to you. Is there anyone else who can speak of god?"

"As historians, we can speak of the gods that humans have revered, feared, worshipped, killed for and so forth. One of our lot achieved notoriety for a very insular view that he expressed symbolically whereby he declared that one particular religion has a history of bloody borders. We judge that remark to be non-scholarly as it betrays a bias, which with but a cursory understanding of human history can be refuted given that every religion has used force against others ... of different religions and even the same religion. Unfortunately, historians are often—some say always—politically aligned, which renders our accounts vulnerable to the critique of power. We are unable to state with authority which if any of the gods of humanity is real."

"Again, we are grateful for such succinct answers, however ineffective they may be in advancing our knowledge of god in the present circumstances."

sotto voce

"Thank god the physicists didn't lecture us with their mathematical models."

"Indeed, and that the holy ones didn't take us for a tour of prehistory."

Addressing all, once again,

"Does anyone have anything to say for or against god ... something that hasn't already been said and something that might actually move this conversation beyond its starting point?"

"Did anyone ask the police? I mean, if we're talking about the untimely and suspicious death of god, shouldn't there be an investigation?"

"As an officer of the law, I stand ready to take your witness statements. But let me add that what I have heard so far is less substantial than even circumstantial evidence and that's not likely gonna help solve this mystery. I need to determine whether in fact a crime has taken place—for example, is god dead and was an attempt on god's life in fact made—and if so what were the motive, means, and opportunity. I need dates, times, places, corroborating testimony, etc. and if you can provide any of these, please come to my office and we can speak privately about the facts of the case. With all due respect to those who have already spoken, I'm only interested in the facts. Just the facts. If anyone is gonna theorize, then that will be me, but only when my investigation has turned up something to theorize about. And let me add one last thing: god, if you're still with us and are capable of giving testimony, I need to hear from you most of all."

He's moving again ... among the brush near the river, picking up the scent of his quarry. The land is quiet, still and very warm and humid. The water is good, clear and cool. The animals know he's here ... know he's hunting ... and are keeping a watchful and safe distance. Many have seen for themselves what he can do and see in him the death that he brings. They have his scent, too and the quiet hides their secret signals to disperse and clear the way for the hunter. Even as he moves through the vast savannah, his presence is sensed well in advance as if rippling through the tall grasses.

"He has been smelled. His natural scent has been masked, but I can smell him out among all the animals here. He thinks he is clever ... that he can outsmart me, but I am a different hunter from any he's met before. He'll soon see for himself. I smell his movement as he leaves the riverside and moves into a stand of trees. He's resting ... waiting, still thinking he's tracking me, when it is I who is tracking him."

The hunter circles the copse slowly and methodically, clearing the land of any interference. It is just the two of them in this vast grassland under the blazing hot sun of a mid-summer afternoon. The smell of his prey gets stronger in his nostrils and his muscles tense in anticipation, like the jaws of a trap primed to snap shut and cut deep into the flesh, ripping through muscle, tendons, nerves and blood vessels with their rusty but razor-sharp fangs.

There is movement among the trees. Stopping mid-stride—subtle and unnoticeable in a world other than this one—the head tilts slightly and pivots as the watched scans the perimeter where the grasses permit greater visibility. There's no pause

to indicate that the hunter's whereabouts have been discovered. Minutes pass.

"He doesn't know I'm here, less than 50 metres from where he stands thinking he is a step ahead of me, that he has calculated what I will do next and when I will do it. But I can stand here for an hour, or longer, not twitching a muscle with my respiration rate lowered by will. I can outwait him. I have done so many times before, with many like him. Let him rest in the shade a bit longer."

A cloud of dust appears in the distance in the direction of the eastern mountain range. Two military jeeps are headed for the isolated pocket of wood where the hunter and his quarry remain standing, both conscious that the stand-off is about to be interrupted.

"Who are they coming for? Must be him. What an unlucky bastard to be hunted down by two adversaries."

A rifle shot breaks the silence, echoing back against the hills. Then a second and a third, their echoes filling the noiseless grasslands with violence awakened. Under the trees the body has fallen to the ground, convulsing and spitting up blood. The jeeps are still quite far away. These were very good shooters, but not good enough to finish the job.

Springing out of the tall grass in great athletic leaps, the big cat lands squarely beside the writhing, bloody body.

"I will end this for you."

The sails were full and the boat was cutting a straight furrow through the rising swells in the direction of the south shore, but the shoreline remained out of view in the waning light of a November afternoon. Racing away from the nearing stack of dark gray clouds to the northwest, buffeted by wind gusts of increasing velocity and pelted by cold, heavy rain, the sailboat appeared to be under the control of a less than able sailor.

At the helm was a yellow figure gripping the wheel hard as much to stay in the boat as to guide it. Twisting and contorting itself this way and that as if it were a demon frantically trying to keep from being sucked into the maw of hell. Waves crested and broke over the stern and starboard flooding the open-hatched cabin space below deck. The figure was losing its footing as the water rushed across the deck and then a towering wave swallowed the little boat momentarily but tossed it back up. When righted and back on course, the boat had lost its helmsman. He'd disappeared in the surge and froth of the storm's fury.

The sailboat pitched in the powerful swells, rolling and yawing at will and miraculously not capsizing as the bow continued to be more or less perpendicular to the waves. Through the dense rain of darkening day, the forest silhouette could just be picked out, but the nearness of shore brought other dangers—underwater rocks that could shred the keel of a boat into strips of timber.

Remarkably, the little boat rode a wave almost completely across the rocky ridge that paralleled the beach, but an untimely roll tilted the boat to port where a craggy outcropping stabbed into the side of the vessel but then released it sending

it bobbing back upright. Having passed over the danger of the rock reef, the boat got dragged ashore by the short, fast breaking waves.

The next morning was calm. The sailboat lay on its side deep in the sand of the shallows. There were no patrols out on the lake. The boat had left from a private dock, leaving no message in town, and no one in their right mind would have taken a boat out in that weather, so it was unlikely there would be a search. Secondly, the area to be searched would be vast, and thirdly, this was a remote area where small aircraft were hard to come by.

On the beach, just above the high tide mark, was the yellow slicker and the body of the helmsman, inert. The sun rose to a clear blue sky, birds were flying overhead and singing in the colourful woods another 20 feet inland, and the air was crisp and still. An otherwise perfect fall day. Around midday, the radiant heat from the sun was beating down on the white beach sand and the yellow slicker that was so out of place.

A skunk walking along the edge of the woods must have been startled, because it sprayed and sent something running through the underbrush. On the beach, the yellow slicker stirred. The head was raised, the nose took a deep sniff, and the coughing and choking set in—signs that the helmsman had survived. Scrambling away from the scent, he ended up back in the water, and the cold of the lake water brought him fully round.

His hair was matted and stuck to his head with dried blood. He'd hit his head on something—maybe that had knocked him unconscious—but his vision was clear and his thinking, once awake, seemed lucid. There was no fresh blood, and there did-

n't seem to be a puncture. It was just a scrape. And a lucky escape.

Crawling back up out of the water and onto the dry sand, he rolled over on his butt and surveyed the shoreline where the waves were placidly pushing up the slight incline of the beach, and there 50 feet down the beach about 20 feet out in the water was the sailboat, lying on its side, with what appeared to be a gouge portside.
"What in the hell did you get us into? How stupid can you be to go out on the lake with a storm front moving in so fast?"

"I got us here safely though, didn't I?"

Getting to his feet was not easy. The first couple of times he stumbled and fell, but on the third try, he was able to shed his slicker and make his way, albeit with an awkward, bandy-legged gait, to the partially submerged boat.

"We can repair this. It isn't such a large hole and it's high enough that it might even be above the waterline if the lake is calm like today."

"You're in luck then. If we get out of this alive, we—no, make that I—will have to do something about it. This kinda shit's been happening too often, and you're gonna get us both killed."

"If it were up to you, we'd never have taken up sailing or skydiving or race car driving ... we'd never have done anything except watch others live ... and read thick books ... and listen to piped-in music from Seattle or Paris or wherever. What's the point in being alive if you're not living?"

"But—fool—you've got to be alive to live, and I'm quite content to stay alive, which means you're gonna have to give."

"Give? Give what?"

"Give up on living on the edge. Those meds—well, I'm filling the prescription as soon as we get back to the city, and we'll just see which one of us survives. Capiche?"

Long, long ago before he got married and had a family, the now-crippled and solitary old peasant had received a holy book from a stranger who was on a pilgrimage, he had said. The old peasant had learned some of the words in school before schooling and the use of the local language had been forbidden. Over the years, he had read it on occasion, sometimes with his family, but there was much he did not understand. While it was a prized possession, sacred writings were illegal so it was never spoken of with others. Ever since the terrible famine which took the lives of his wife and two children and many other villagers, he alone knew of the book.

One day the young emperor came through the village in his imperial chair sedan attended by hundreds of servants and bodyguards. The remote countryside was notoriously filled with bandits and no one of status ever traveled without a large retinue that included armed soldiers.

Stories had circulated about peculiar beliefs among the peasants and the emperor wanted to judge the situation for himself. In village after village, he heard the same story. There was no foreign religion being practiced here. Everyone—men and women, young and old—swore unending allegiance to His Magnificence. Houses were ransacked and looted—though there was very little to steal in the countryside—however no religious articles ever turned up.

But in one village, an old hare-lipped woman rambled on and on about this and that and happened to mention the name of a foreign prophet. The villagers told the old woman to shut up and begged the emperor to ignore her because she was a fool. Nevertheless, the emperor inquired about this foreigner, and

the old woman talked about a book, a sacred book. The villagers again tried to make the old woman keep quiet, but this aroused the emperor's curiosity more. He insisted on seeing the book. The old woman pointed to an old man and said, "He has one." Then, she pointed to several others and said, "They have it, too."

"Bring me the book," commanded the emperor, but no one moved. No one admitted to having the book. The emperor grew impatient and turning to his guards said, "Accompany these peasants to their homes and find that book. Turn their homes upside down and inside out ... but get that book ... every single copy."

After an hour or so, the guards returned with six books. The emperor opened one of the volumes but couldn't make out the writing, so he said to the peasant who appeared to be the leader, "Read this to me." The peasant said he couldn't read. The emperor pointed to several others and ordered them to read. No one would. "We cannot read Your Magnificence, because we have no school to learn how to read." After consulting his chief advisor, the emperor directed anyone from his entourage who could read this strange hand to come forward and tell what was written in this mysterious book. Several came forward but none could recognize the language and all left shaking their heads at this undecipherable writing.

The emperor, now convinced that this book was a threat to his kingdom, had all of the copies piled in the middle of the village to be burned. The emperor demanded that the old hare-lipped woman start the fire, but she refused and ran screaming down the road, pulling her white hair out by the roots. Next, the emperor looked to the village elder who also refused. Without

warning, one of the soldiers struck the man with a sword and the peasant collapsed to the ground.

From the village crowd, a man stepped out and proceeded to take the flame from one of the guards and set the pile of books alight. The peasants gasped in fright and muttered unintelligible words as if reciting them. The man who had stepped out looked at the emperor, bowed and said, "As you wished, Your Magnificence."

The emperor was greatly surprised at the man's action and words, which on one hand paid proper obeisance to the young emperor and on the other hand intervened to prevent a slaughter of his neighbours. Much impressed, the emperor rewarded the man by appointing him the emperor's guardian of the village.

Satisfied that he had snuffed out a rebellion in his kingdom, the emperor ordered the imperial chair sedan to return to the palace where a celebration was decreed for the following day.

Next day, as the emperor was being fêted, the village elder who had been murdered was given full burial rites, and for the occasion, the old cripple retrieved his secreted volume from a hole in a gnarled and barren old apple tree and read what words he could to the people.

You sit in the same chair you picked up last year on garbage collection day at the same desk that constituted the full extent of the 'furnishings' of the bachelor's apartment you rented when the royalty cheques stopped coming and you write ... and wait.

It's not that you can't write. There's an endless supply of material in your head that only needs some coaxing and Voilà! you have a story, a stage play, a novella and during brain-recharging you can spin out no limit of web content in multiple languages—English and a host of Google languages.

The problem is that no one's responding to you any longer. But have you paid attention to your neighbourhood lately? Last year you were bumping into people on the sidewalk, breathing in the exhaust of other subway riders, struggling to find hours of the day or night when you could write without the distractions of city life. When's the last time you heard a siren? When's the last time you heard the heavy bass of a car stereo at full volume? When did you last hear anyone walking around or talking in your apartment building?

The people have disappeared and you didn't even see it happening. Only now do you notice the quiet that I've just pointed out. Remember how long it took to go through check-out at the supermarket? And now, the shelves that used to be full are mostly bare. And you can't have missed the fact that there are no more cashiers. It's just you and the self-serve kiosks. What do you think would happen if you walked out without paying? I'll tell you. Nothing. No one is there and no one has been there for weeks. Observant for a writer, eh?

Get out of your one-room apartment and walk the streets. You'll see what I'm getting at. You're alone, man. You're all alone. Where are the cars? What happened to the rush-hour traffic jams? Where are all those people who herded you along with them on the busy sidewalks. Look at the TVs in the store window displays. Nothing's from today. Look at the newspapers and magazines at the corner store. There's nothing with this month's date is there? Or even last month's date or the month before?

Now, put 2 and 2 together, and you'll understand why your writing has hit a dead-end. There's nobody left—no one to read and enjoy and pay for that beautiful prose you manufacture out of nothing, like a magician. You're the only reader left, and that never satisfied any writer I've ever met.

So, now that you know what the world's come to, what will you do? I suspect you will have to prove to yourself that what I've been telling you is true. Go ahead. You have all the time in the world.

Just take a walk in the neighbourhood and look for a car with the keys in the ignition. Millions of cars, and there's gotta be more than a few abandoned by careless drivers. Take a drive. Go to the airport. You haven't seen any planes lately, have you? See if there are any planes taking off or landing. Go to another city and see if it's any different there. Find a computer connected to the Internet and try all of your contacts. Call information. No, try 9-1-1. See if anyone answers.

When you're finally convinced that there's no one else on the planet, we'll think about what you should do next. I think we'll be able to keep you quite busy for the rest of your life which could be long or short, as you choose.

In attempting to overcome a summer writing drought, the author resorted to using a variety of online writing prompts. For example, the second story in the collection started with the prompt to write a 200-word epic set 200 years in the future about a fanatic and a microscope with the following bit of dialogue, "You have my permission." The fifth story followed the suggestion to write a story in three sections, each section recounting the same event from a different character's point of view. The 14th story was written from the perspective of a minor character from a previously written story ('The Funeral'). The 29th story was entirely written as a dialogue, with an interior dialogue embedded. And, well you get the idea.

Of course, the technology exists to commission a computer program to write entire stories, which means that the writing challenge for us carbon units becomes that much greater. That in itself could spark a story and no doubt has already prompted many, but there's nothing wrong with putting a creative spin on a previously-told story.

About the Author

Peter McMillan lives with his wife and two flat-coated retrievers on the northwest shore of Lake Ontario, and in addition to writing he teaches English.